

PC GAMER[®]



32 PAGES

REVIEWS SPECIAL

DEFINITIVE VERDICT
ON **RESIDENT
EVIL 2**

INTERVIEW

*"It's basically
the same as
Dragon's Lair"*

CHARLIE BROOKER
ON BANDERSNATCH

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TOTAL WAR™



THREE KINGDOMS

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REWRITING THE RULEBOOK

FUTURE

ISSUE 328



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Distributed by Marketforce, 5 Churchill Place, Canary Wharf, London, E14 5HU
www.marketforce.co.uk Tel: 0203 787 9001
ISSN 1351-3540

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“PC GAMERS LOVE THEM SOME TACTICAL WARFARE”



The reason we keep putting *Total War* games on our cover – other than the fact PC gamers love them some tactical warfare – is because its a series of constant reinvention. While each features tactical battles and strategic diplomacy, the key differences always add up to something distinct. Thanks to its settings, *Three Kingdoms* might be the most original *Total War* to date.

PHIL SAVAGE
Specialist in
War correspondent

Twitter
@Octaeder

This month
Reported from the frontlines of Avalanche's war against a boring post-apocalypse.

A few months ago I received an email expressing disappointment at our lack of Early Access coverage. The result is this issue's Early Access feature. If you've got thoughts about areas of PC gaming we should be giving more pages to, get in touch.

Phil Savage

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EDITOR
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The PC Gamer team



TOM SENIOR
Specialist in
Only war

Twitter
@PCGLudo

This month
After being deployed to Horsham to see *Total War*, returned home and played some *Warhammer*.



ANDY KELLY
Specialist in
Flame wars

Twitter
@ultrabright

This month
Quizzed Black Mirror creator Charlie Brooker. It wasn't so much a war of words as just a nice chat.



PHILIPPA WARR
Specialist in
Name: Warr

This month
Was drafted into a war against the sea by the buggy spawn points of Early Access MMO *Atlas*. Discover who won in this month's Now Playing.



STEVEN MESSNER
Specialist in
Peace (he's Canadian)

Twitter
@stevenmessner

This month
Lost a war against ooze, as detailed in his Early Access feature entry on *Caves of Qud*.

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#328
MARCH 2019

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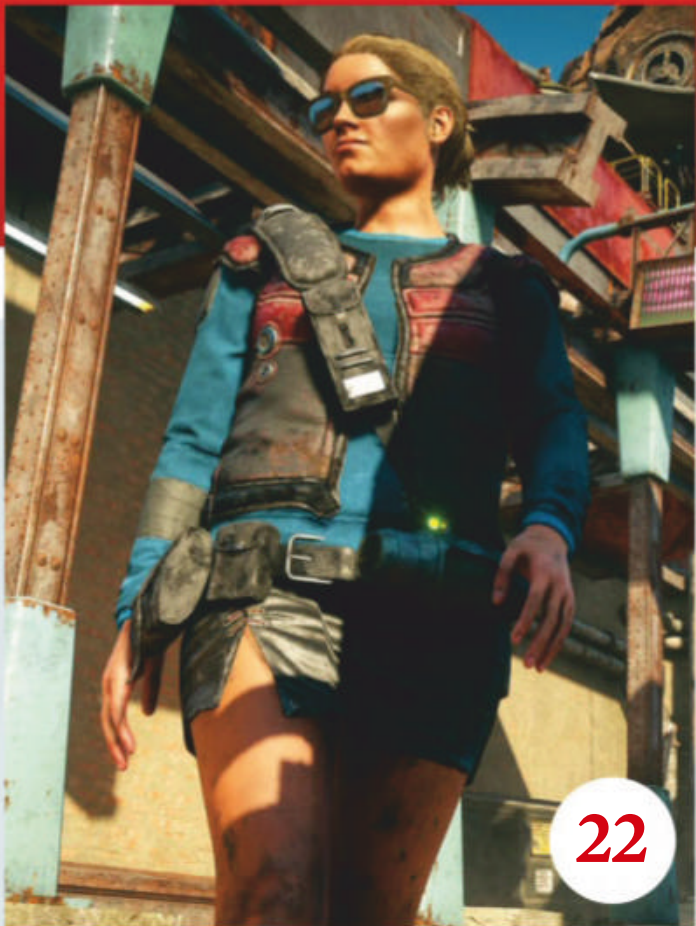
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MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



BUNGIE CUTS THE CORD

Activision and Bungie break up. What does it mean for **DESTINY 2**?

Bungie kicked off 2019 with news that it is ending its publishing relationship with Activision eight years into the decade-long arrangement. Bungie always held the IP rights to the *Destiny* franchise, but Activision will transfer the publishing rights, leaving its fate entirely in the hands of its developers. But what does that actually mean for *Destiny*?

Well, right now it just means an optimistic subreddit. After all, Activision so easily falls into the role of evil corporate overlord (in no small part due to earnings call banter like,

“While *Forsaken* is a high-quality expansion, with strong engagement and new modes of play, it did not achieve our commercial expectations, and there is still work to do to fully re-engage the core *Destiny* fanbase”).

It’s thus easy to see Bungie as the opposite: a nurturing and protective

ACTIVISION SO EASILY FALLS INTO THE ROLE OF EVIL CORPORATE OVERLORD

guardian whose stewards tweet things like, “We are not disappointed with *Forsaken*. We set out to build a game that *Destiny* players would love, and at Bungie, we love it too.”

The temptation is to hope all the things players hate and chalk up to business motives, rather than for love of the game, will disappear with Activision. That would be impossible because, for as long as I’ve known it, the *Destiny* community is capable of being annoyed about *and* in love with everything simultaneously.

As per Bungie’s official announcement, “We know self-publishing won’t be easy; there’s still much for us to learn as we grow as an

UP THE ANTE

MERMAIDS



After strands of the UK press and a well-known writer's scaremongering, the Mermaids charity (which supports gender diverse and trans children) had its Lottery funding put under review. Hbomberguy reacted with a *Donkey Kong 64* livestream, raising £260,000 for Mermaids. ■ **PW**

IO, IO

IO INTERACTIVE



IO Interactive is launching a second studio based in Malmö, Sweden. The new IO Malmö will support *Hitman* development and, according to CEO Hakan Abrak, help in "creating brand-new and exciting endeavours". Here's hoping a second studio means the ace *Hitman 2* will enjoy a long life. ■ **PS**

SHIPSHAPE

TURN-BASED PILLARS



Obsidian added an option for slower, more tactical turn-based combat to the formerly real-time-with-pause *Pillars of Eternity II*. It might seem like a small change, but it makes the combat feel brand new – which is a perfect excuse to set sail for the Deadfire Archipelago again. ■ **AK**



ABOVE, TOP: Gambit mode is great, and the focus of the next season.

ABOVE, BOTTOM: Will sci-fi electro-wizards still have a home on PC?

independent, global studio, but we see unbounded opportunities and potential in *Destiny*."

It feels like Bungie's staff will be happier to focus on what success means to them as people who create the games, rather than have targets imposed by a publisher with shareholders to please. But it's also sensible to expect missteps as Bungie figures out this publishing malarkey. And Bungie will still need to make money, so it will need to figure out which methods of monetisation to keep and which to ditch.

LIVING VICARIOUSLY

We're particularly interested to see whether PC will be part of Bungie's future plans. Director Luke Smith confirms that Vicarious Visions, which handled the PC port, is winding down its involvement, so the question will be whether Bungie can find another company for the porting, or whether they staff up and bring it in-house.

Alternatively, independence might be temporary. Prior to Activision, Bungie spent a decade working on *Halo* with Microsoft. Perhaps Bungie fancies being single for a bit before partnering with a new publisher and settling down to produce *Destiny 3* (and whatever that 'Matter' trademark filing from 2018 turns out to be).

Philippa Warr

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

RTX 2060

Nvidia's £340 graphics card is the most appealingly priced option from their RTX lineup.

AGDQ 2019

The speedrunning event pulled in \$2.4m for charity. Our highlight was Spootybiscuit's *Necrodancer* run.

Tiny Bird Garden Deluxe

A low-key joy, you can just leave this mobile game expansion open as you work and check in on its visitors.

Star Wars

EA reportedly cancelled its Vancouver studio's *Star Wars* game. We find its lack of faith disturbing.

Assassin's Creed

Ubisoft's latest *Odyssey* DLC missed the mark so badly with player agency the studio had to apologise.

Atlas

Where to start? Bugs, a compromised admin account, a server rollback, stability issues...

LOWS



The Spy

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

The Spy wishes to entertain the possibility of publisharmageddon: the lesser-known cousin of the indiepocalypse. As Bungie breaks free from the grip of Activision and there's talk of change at the top at Blizzard, there's a case to be made that this will be the year that cracks form in the industry's old powerhouses. In particular, let's consider the uncertain future of EA.

Buoyed year-on-year by vastly successful sports games and *The Sims*, it's nonetheless been years since the California giant turned out an unqualified smash hit. The launch of *Anthem* feels like one last test for a set of guiding principles that were put in place several years ago, but have yet to make anybody happy. They go as follows: turn every game into a rolling service, own every part of the licence, and build it all in Frostbite.

These principles likely looked like savvy business a couple of years ago. Indeed, they've worked for the *Battlefield* series – but then again it feels like they were designed for *Battlefield*, a series that has always suited the 'game as service' model and, as a DICE game, gets on well with DICE's engine.

Consider instead the damage that has been done to BioWare. It has struggled twice to overcome complications introduced

by the Frostbite engine (getting away with it for *Inquisition*; less so for *Andromeda*) and has lost much of its old school creative leadership over the last few years. *Anthem* is a promising game – The Spy hears positive rumblings, at least – but what it fundamentally represents is a compromise between this new EA monoculture and the sorts of games that BioWare is known for. This is not something that anybody outside of EA wanted. It is an entirely self-set challenge. And if it fails, and takes down BioWare with it, there will have been no good reason to embark on the attempt.

DARK SIDE

Then there's the matter of Star Wars. What must have seemed like one of the best deals in the industry a couple of years ago now appears to be an albatross. **Visceral's open world Star Wars game** has been quietly canned – again! – despite being the only part of EA's Star Wars offering, other than *Battlefront* and a few mobile games, to achieve a public showing. Lucasfilm is notoriously protective, but The Spy suspects that EA has given itself a problem in this regard too: Lucasfilm has the right to be cautious when the *Battlefront II* loot box fiasco effectively smashed the words 'Star Wars' and 'gambling for children' together all over the mainstream press. What else can you trace that bad press back to, if not EA's over-investment in the service game model?

The Spy believes there's a serious upheaval on the horizon: perhaps the loss of the Star Wars licence, perhaps the sublimation of BioWare into EA proper, perhaps both. If that sounds far-fetched, consider how deeply ingrained EA's flaws have become in the psyche of the gaming community. The 'worst company in America' narrative, sustained by forums and YouTubers at the expense of the people who do the day-to-day work of creating EA's games, may end up being the thing that brings about the end of EA's preeminence – because while it has built principles to create and retain customers, it's failed to take any steps that might win them back some fans. Spy out. ■

The Spy

**ANTHEM IS A PROMISING GAME
– THE SPY HEARS POSITIVE
RUMBLINGS, AT LEAST**



THE SPY

The Spy sometimes wonders if megacorporations were a bad idea.

This month in... 2009



1 *World of Warcraft* launched in 2004 and made a lot of money. Other publishers looked at all the money and asked, 'But what if it was ours?' And so the late-'00s were awash with also-ran MMOs. Five years into *WoW*'s dominance, PC Gamer rounded up the best of the rest. Many of these MMOs are still alive today, albeit as free-to-play monstrosities with just a handful of players.

ISSUE
198, March 2009
ON THE COVER
Empire: Total War
IN THE CHARTS
The Fear – Lily Allen

2 Hey, look at that, a *Total War* game on the cover. How times have changed. An *Empire: Total War* review was the star of the issue, earning an enthusiastic 94%.



3 PC gamers may remember being horrified by *Dragon Age: Origins*' pre-release trailer, which was set to Marilyn Manson's *This Is the New Shit* presumably because a marketing man weaned on a diet of cover shooters saw a tactical RPG about wizards and got scared. Fortunately, Evan's chunky PCG preview did a much better job at explaining why BioWare's world would be worth our time.



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Tom Clancy's The Division® 2 is not yet rated. May contain content inappropriate for children. Please consult with ESRB.org, PEGI.info, or your regional game ratings organization.

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Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES

How to make a gun in an FPS sound real.



Photo credit: Aaron Marks

THE SOUND OF GAMES

Sound designer **WATSON WU** on recording sound effects

When you pilot a yacht in *Just Cause 3*, you don't think about the sound of the engine – at least consciously. Your brain acknowledges that, yes, this sounds like you're behind the wheel of a yacht, and the illusion is created. But recording the sound of that boat's rumbling engines, and the roar of the ocean as it moves through it, involved a real 60-foot yacht, a man named Watson Wu, multiple microphones and a lot of puke.

"For the onboard yacht sounds, multiple microphones were rigged at the front, the side, in the engine room and at the helm and rear," says Wu, a sound designer and field recordist who works in TV, film and videogames. "We had to leave the engine room door open to capture the audio, so I got seasick from the diesel fumes and from the swaying of the three-story boat. I've been on plenty of boats and never got sick, but every time I hit the record button I silently ran to the starboard side and vomited."

Wu was at sea for three hours, most of which was spent being sick. But when he returned to the studio and played the recordings back, none of his retching was audible. "I guess I can't help but capture great sounds, no matter the situation," he says. "And if needed, I can puke silently!" This enthusiasm is normal for Wu, and it's clear

from his work, his website and his entertaining Twitter feed that he loves what he does. Even if, most of the time, players won't appreciate how much work goes into what he does on more than a subconscious level.

"I'm used to working in the background," he says. "Everything you play requires sound that someone has to record, edit, design and implement into the game. A gunshot sound that lasts only for a mere second may seem simple enough, but the process can take a day to correctly record, and a further day to edit and implement. As a sound designer my job is not just creating audio candy for your ears to enjoy, but emotions too."

SOUND OUT

After leaving university, where he studied music, Wu read a magazine article that led him to a book by Aaron Marks called *The Complete Guide to Game Audio*. "I read it twice and followed his advice," says Wu. "I attended the Game Developers Conference in San Francisco multiple times, met developers and landed contract jobs." Some of these contracts included Will Wright's infamous *Spore*, *Operation Flashpoint* sequel *Dragon Rising*, and tactical shooter *Red Orchestra 2: Heroes of Stalingrad*.

Wu also provides audio for other media, from films such as *Baby Driver* and *Transformers*, to commercials for Lexus and the US Army. But of all the work he does, he



Making noises

Field recording is an important part of creating convincing sounds in games. Examples can be anything from the ambience of a building to a dog barking. To enhance realism, multiple microphones are used to capture the sound from different angles. These are then implemented dynamically in-game by a team of sound designers.



Photo credit: Seth Johnson



Photo Credit: Tiffany Karamitsos

FAR LEFT: Wu records the sound of a roaring crowd for a sports game.

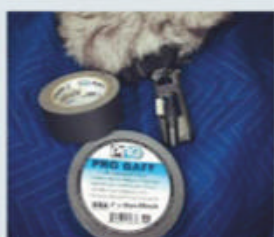
LEFT: Next time you do a wheelspin in a driving game, think of this photograph.

KITTED OUT *Some of Wu's field recording gear*



PORTABLE RECORDER

Wu carries a high quality portable recorder for whenever he hears an interesting sound.



GAFFER TAPE

Being a field recordist involves a lot of taping microphones to things, so Wu always has a few rolls of this to hand.



HYDROPHONES

Designers love underwater levels, which is where these specialist underwater microphones come in handy.



FOLDING CHAIR

Wu's job takes him to some isolated places, and having a chair to hand is essential for long recording sessions.

finds videogames the most challenging. "In games you need to record and design sounds for all possible scenarios," he says. "Movies and TV shows are linear, so I mostly work based on the picture. No matter how many times you watch the movie, it'll sound the same. But when a first-person shooter game requires close and far perspective gunshots, we need to record multiple variations to excite your ear."

And, as that yacht incident illustrates, field recording also means getting your hands dirty. "This is one of the most difficult industries I've tapped into," says Wu. "Some of the most exciting games I've been hired to work on involved recording an M1 Abrams battle tank and other armoured vehicles. It took a lot of phone calls and emails to acquire permission to record sounds on a US Marine Corps military base, but they eventually let me in, and I actually got to ride on, and record, a moving tank."

Wu also spent time at the Sebring International Raceway while working on audio for *Project Cars 2*. "I was asked to record the onboard and external sounds of Red Bull race cars," he says. "The 600-horsepower Honda Civic rally car was so violent that it broke the battery cable powering my large multitrack field recorder."

GO IT ALONE

But of all the situations Wu's job has landed him in, having an entire theme park to himself has to rank highly. For the game *Planet Coaster*, Frontier asked him to record

a variety of coasters and rides without the ambient noise of a busy theme park. And so, after making a few phone calls, he found an out-of-season park in Indiana that let him and his many microphones in to do the job.

"This was an incredible experience," says Wu. "I still can't believe I got to record on all those crazy rides without anyone else around. It took a lot of careful planning and rigging to capture clean sounds without wind noise and water smacking against the microphones."

Wu works remotely in his own studio, and I wonder what his working relationship with developers' in-house sound designers is like. "It depends on the company I'm working with," he says.

"Some companies only want raw recordings because the audio team wants to do its own editing, while others want fully designed files. Phone calls are crucial, as sometimes I want the audio director or audio lead to

give me examples of what they're after, even if they have to make the sound with their mouth."

After talking to Wu, whose passion is infectious, I have a newfound appreciation for the work that goes into providing sound for videogames. It's an aspect of development most people take for granted, but now whenever I pilot a boat in a game I'll think of him retching over the side of that yacht. A small sacrifice, perhaps, but an example of how much of themselves developers put into the games they create. And if you ever need someone to vomit quietly, you know who to call. ■

Andy Kelly

"THIS IS ONE OF THE MOST DIFFICULT INDUSTRIES I'VE TAPPED INTO"

In Focus

THE HIDDEN DETAILS OF DESIGN



LITTLE BOYS' ROOM

One of the most striking areas in **WHAT REMAINS OF EDITH FINCH** is the twins' room. Designer Chris Bell picks out key details. *By Philippa Warr*

FORT-LESS

1 The room didn't always have its distinctive opposing forts. Instead it was a 'T' shaped space – two lofted bunk beds joined by a single set of stairs between them. The forts idea came around the same time as Calvin's death by swingset story.

LOW ENTRY

2 Crawling into the room, you can only see Calvin's side – a ten-year-old's room. "The player gets an immediate read of 'kids room' – but when they stand and turn and see Sam's liquor and cigarettes and camera tripod, it's a surprise," says Bell.

MOVING ON

3 Little touches make it clear Sam outlived Calvin. Sam's height marking on the door leave Calvin's behind, Sam's fort bridge has been taken down and the fort itself is used for box storage. Sam also has the aforementioned liquor and cigarettes.

SPACE RACE

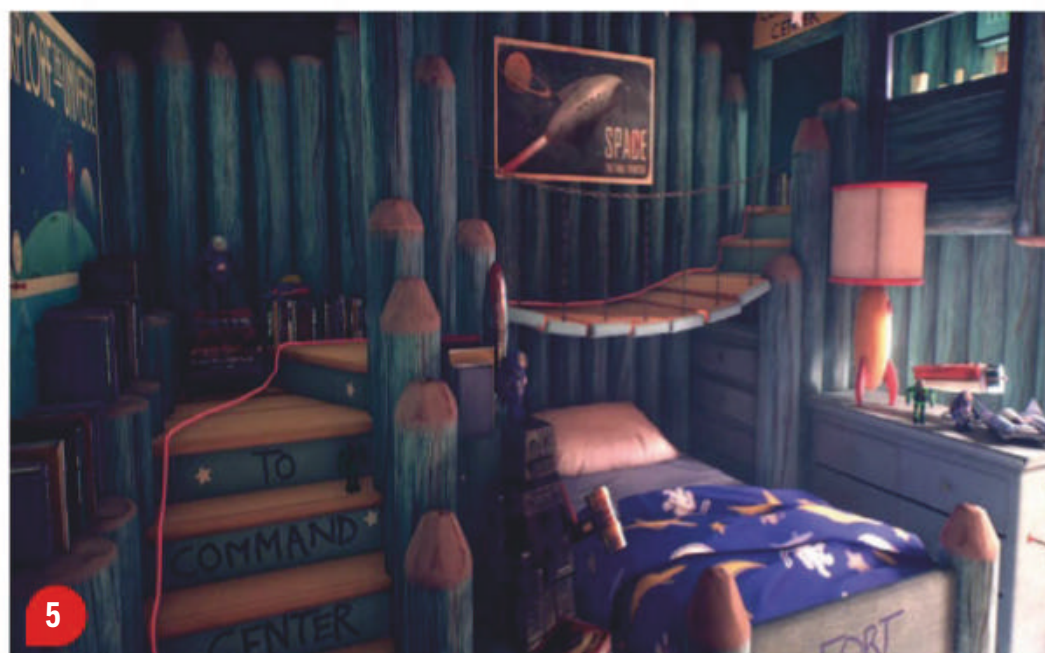
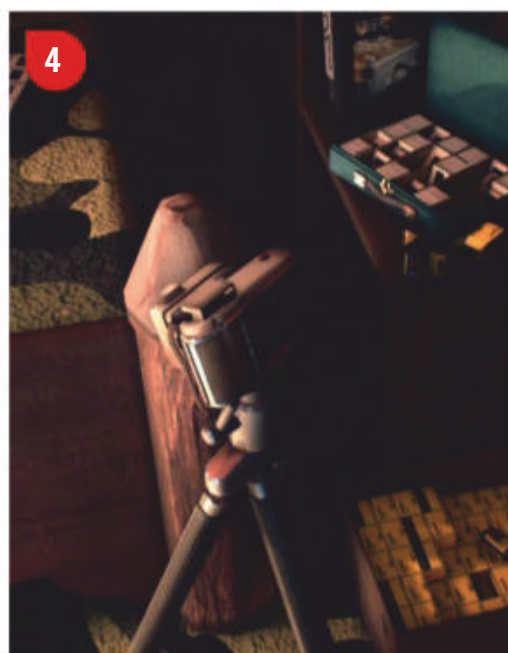
4 Calvin's love of space came because it paired well with the story of wanting to go high on a swingset. Sam's story was themed around photography, so his side picks up those references with the darkroom, tripod and so on.

SIGNPOSTING

5 To ensure players didn't miss Calvin's lookout, the team painted "To Command Center" in big letters on the stairs and added a sign above the lookout entrance. An electric cable traces the path, "drawing a literal line for them" says Bell.

BELL'S OWN HISTORY

6 "I had a blast designing this room ... inspired by fond memories of building forts with my brother Stephen and little cousin Shane, roleplaying cops and robbers or trying not to hurt each other while wrestling and playing King of the Hill Bed."



TOO-EARLY ADOPTION

How devs decide to make games for new ecosystems. *By Xalavier Nelson Jr.*

Cash payments. Exclusive development support. Marketing features with increased visibility. These are just a few of the incentives that may be offered to a developer in return for committing to a new platform early. An ecosystem needs projects supporting it, and devs need to ensure that they have a substantial audience to sell their games to. However, when a platform is actual hardware that takes up space, the costs and considerations developers face can vary wildly.

“THERE’S A JOY IN CREATING SOMETHING SURPRISING OUT OF REALLY CHEAP PARTS”

“I first got to try the Magic Leap 1 as part of a contract early in 2018, and I immediately knew that I wanted to find a way to work with the device,” says veteran independent developer and consultant Ryan Evans. “[Magic Leap] lets you imbue everyday objects and spaces around you with new meaning and lets you interact with familiar spaces in an all new way.” However, the cost of innovation was not cheap. The headset alone cost him \$2,295 dollars – not including tax – and the company couldn’t ship it to his home so Evans had to drive to San Francisco. “The expenses so far have mostly just been money,” Evans says. “To their credit, Magic Leap just had a grant application

process to give money and hardware to indie developers with ideas. Getting funding from a platform holder goes a long way into making early development viable. In the meantime I’ll keep looking for consulting work in the space to continue to self-fund, and hopefully as a consumer market comes into existence I can keep making more games for them.” While Evans will have to buy necessary future iterations of the hardware as well, he believes continued consulting jobs that use his growing knowledge of the technology will put him in a prime position to recoup costs and take advantage of the Leap’s potential growth in the consumer market in the future.

On the other side of the cost scale, you’ll find developers like Alistair Aitcheson, a creator who uses custom hardware he builds himself for playful art installations (such as a piece at the National Videogame

Museum) and interactive stage shows. “A lot of my work is made using Arduinos, which are about £20-£30 each,” says Aitcheson. “There’s certainly cheaper alternatives but I’m happy to pay the extra to avoid having to faff around with setup. Other props are found on eBay: rubber chickens, Duplo and Morphsuits for example. There’s a joy in creating something surprising out of really cheap parts. People can see how it was made and be inspired by that.”

The developers of *System Shock*-inspired minimal first-person adventure *Spirits of Xanadu* found their project gaining Tobii Eye Tracker

compatibility with no extra cost or effort, as the company needed more titles under their banner. “In our case, they used a software wrapper rather than native support so it didn’t require any effort on our part to implement,” says *Spirits of Xanadu* writer Lee Williams. “With nothing to lose, and intrigued by the new tech, we agreed to let them add the support in return for placement on their website.”

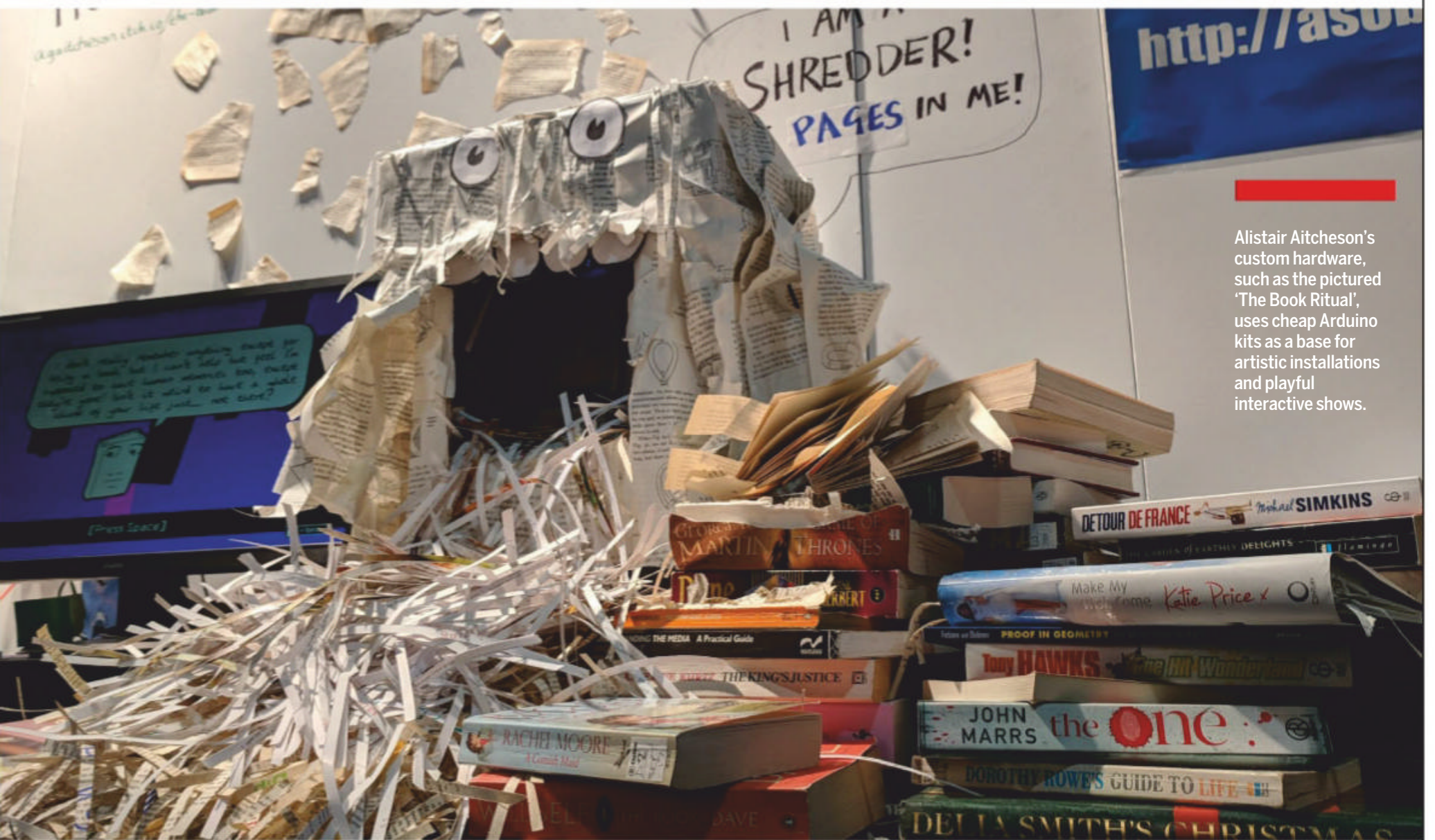
SWEET SPOT

While even low-cost development for new or custom hardware can seem daunting, one element that drives developers to tackle these challenges is fear. What happens if a platform is the opportunity their game needs, and they miss its golden launch period? That’s the question the developers of subversive indie platformer *The Messenger* faced with the Nintendo Switch in early 2018. “We never doubted that launching on Switch was a great idea,” studio cofounder Martin Brouard said. “However as more and more games started to come out on Switch in the second half of 2018, it became harder to be some kind of no-brainer purchase for players. Nintendo did give us a lot of visibility, though, so our sales on that platform are very good. But had we launched three to four months earlier we probably would have struck gold in a major way. We are still happy with the results, though.” In the end, polishing the game, and receiving major marketing showcases from Nintendo as well as publisher Devolver Digital helped *The Messenger* surmount an increasingly crowded market to some degree.

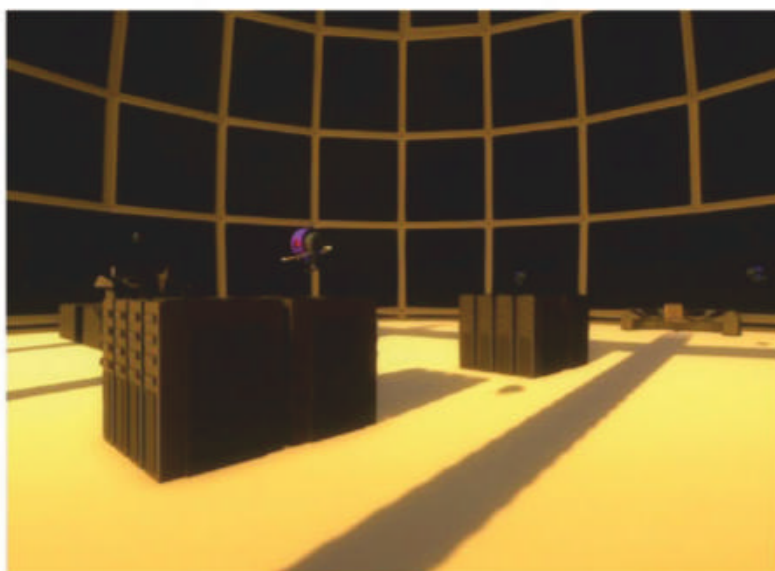
A new platform – particularly one with a physical component – is a risk for everyone involved. However, the more this risk is assuaged for the creative people who make the content these platforms need, the more likely success is for everyone in our industry’s constant pursuit of a new horizon. ■

XALAVIER NELSON JR.
I’m a full-time game writer and narrative designer, with credits inside and out of gaming.





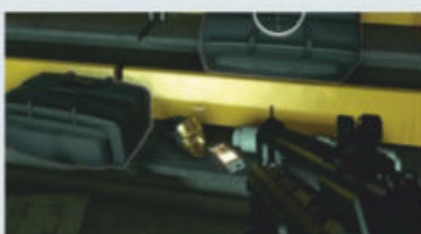
Alistair Aitcheson's custom hardware, such as the pictured 'The Book Ritual', uses cheap Arduino kits as a base for artistic installations and playful interactive shows.



FAR LEFT: The Magic Leap Creator's Edition currently costs developers nearly \$2,300 to buy, with no special benefits attached.

LEFT: The devs of subversive indie throwback *The Messenger* launched on PC and Switch simultaneously, just after the Switch market began to get crowded.

WHAT THE TECH? *Here are a few of the curious peripherals that built significant industry support*



TOBII EYE TRACKER
The Tobii website boasts over 130 games using its eye-tracking technology. Players can control and interact with games from *Hitman* to *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*, using sets of 'gaze-based interactions'.



RAZER HYDRA
This magnetised motion controller might have faded into the memory of obscure peripheral lists everywhere, if not for its ties to Valve. The Razer Hydra *Portal 2* bundle has over a dozen levels exclusive to its version of the game.



G560 LIGHTSYNC SPEAKERS
Using rear-facing LEDs, Logitech's Lightsync speakers projected colour and significant game information into your physical space in major triple-A games of the time including *Battlefield 1*, *CS: GO* and *GTA V*.



LEAP MOTION
A relatively low cost of entry for hand tracking made the Leap Motion an attractive option for adding physical interaction to independent projects, as with FlyInside's modding of Microsoft's *Flight Simulator X*.

DISCLAIMER: As a professional developer, I am on friendly and/or working terms with parties mentioned in this piece.

SEND

It's like a forum, but with fewer My Chemical Romance lyrics

Not renewing

I'm not renewing my subscription because, a) you showed a horrible looking snippet from a Windows XP VM defrag.exe (it's 2019), and b) in the last three issues not one of the Buyer's Guide desktop rigs show an RTX graphics card. ■

Jeff

Phil: What can I say? XP's defrag tool is just more aesthetically interesting than Win 10's static menu. As for the Buyer's Guide, you'd notice – were you still a subscriber – that now we've had a bit more time with Nvidia's new cards we've added them to the mid-range

and advanced builds. Nevertheless, I apologise for failing you in these two incredibly specific instances.

May appeal

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Phil: I don't even know what this one refers to. Are we being trolled by the Arizona Department of Corrections?

Old junk

Clearing out some old junk and found these old CDs that came with your magazines back in 2004! These demos got me into PC gaming. Happy new year folks! ■
Ian

YOUR REVIEWS

■ **Divinity Original Sin II.** Finally playing it co-op with a friend. No matter how many times we try to break the quests, the game doubles down and laughs at our stupid, stupid faces.
UrbaNebula
Exhibit #1,459 in our research into the fact that gamers are basically all masochists.

■ I definitely won't get in the magazine for tweeting about being amazed that my mid-range PC can emulate the Wii U version of *Mario Kart 8* flawlessly.
Ryan
Ha, joke's on you! You *did* get in the magazine, and now you'll be going to videogames jail.

■ **Morrowind.** But I'm trapped in a cave. And there are wolves outside. And I have no magic left. And I sold all my weapons for a spell. 10/10. Great, realistic experience.
NOTAnErr0r_404
What life have you had for any of that to be a 'realistic' experience?

■ **Monster Hunter World.** It's changed enough from the old games to make it feel fresh. Smacking the crap out of dinosaur faces has never felt so perfect.
Bird Religion
If anyone ever questions the validity of gaming as an artform, just ask them which other medium has perfected smacking the crap out of dinosaur faces.



Positive influence

I read last month's letter about how the gaming world has become overly critical, even entitled, and would like to add that I believe gaming journalism needs to take some big responsibility for this. PC Gamer is the number one PC games magazine, and has raised several generations of gamers. It is common for a game you don't like to receive an overly negative, insulting review about a game. *The Crew* and *The Crew 2* come to mind – your reviews were so nasty it beggars belief.

Maybe it is time to step up and start being more responsible 100% of the time, rather than 95% of the time. ■
James

Phil: This is something we think about a lot. We *do* write far fewer negative reviews, largely because there are so many games being released that it's often not worth our time focusing on the bad ones. One key difference is that, to my mind, we are never 'nasty' about *specific* developers – even when joking about *The Crew 2*'s strange storefronts.



Phil: Happy new year, Ian!

Weekender event

I've attended every PC Gamer Weekender event in London since 2016 and have enjoyed my time at all of them. I have been eagerly awaiting news of a 2019 event, but have been unable to find any reference to such an event online. Will there be a PC Gamer Weekender event this year? ■
Adam

Phil: Not this year, I'm afraid Adam. While I can't say for sure what the Weekender's future will be, I can confirm that we won't be running it in 2019. That's no reflection on the support we've received from you and the rest of our brilliant readers, who have made each show a pleasure.

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PREVIEW





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
May 14, 2019

DEVELOPER
Avalanche Studios, id Software

PUBLISHER
Bethesda Softworks

LINK
www.bit.ly/rage_2

RAGE 2

Avalanche attempts to bring new life to id's wasteland

Despite the number at the end of its name, you'd be forgiven for assuming *Rage 2* has little to do with its predecessor. The original *Rage* was dry, mostly linear and often described as 'solid' – a critical shorthand for 'yeah, this is good, but...' The sequel feels brash, vibrant and silly. In short, *Rage 2* is the sort of game that has Andrew W.K. playing over its trailer.

"The first thing I wrote on the whiteboard when I met with the team was 'more crazy than *Rage*,'" says Tim Willits, id's studio director. "Time and time again we told those guys, 'Everything is on the table. Everything is possible.' If they'd wanted to make 12-foot cockroaches that you ride, we'd have done it. We don't have them, but we could. One of the great things about the *Rage* universe is there's nothing that is too over-the-top. That's what people like, so we've tried to steer into it."

Having played a chunk of *Rage 2*, I can confirm the lack of giant roaches, and also that it is more over-the-top – albeit not quite as much as I was expecting. Nevertheless, it's only an hour into my session that I find myself competing in Mutant Bash, a sort of wave-based arena combat challenge that takes the form of a TV show set in a rundown warehouse unconvincingly decorated with gaudy cardboard cutouts. So that's something.

The team responsible for *Rage 2*'s exaggerated style isn't id, but Avalanche, creator of the *Just Cause* series. "It's a more holistic collaboration," explains Willits. "Avalanche is the developer, but we have people at id that have helped when they can. We have everyone from the controller guys, to the animation team, the art team, some of the designers. We work with those guys everyday."

Combat is also more over-the-top, thanks largely to a new suite of special

abilities. I dash around the Mutant Bash arena, evading attacks and launching mutants into traps with my Shatter ability. As more mutants rush in, I throw a Vortex Grenade that pulls the remaining enemies together into a conveniently shotgunable ball before flinging them across the map. For the finale, a minigun-toting giant bursts in. It's a difficult fight, but I've caused enough carnage to charge my Overdrive bar – regenerating my health and turbocharging my damage output.

"When you play *Doom 2016*, we reward you for getting in and doing the glory kills," says Willits. "Well in *Rage 2*, we reward you for getting in and doing the abilities, because it pushes you into combat." Willits highlights the lack of long-range attack options, despite *Rage 2* taking place in an open world that offers potential for large combat environments. "In a bigger world like that ... you can engage far away, but we don't give you the tools to do it. We encourage you to get into the fight. That's by design. Pushing forward – movement as offence and defence – is very id-style combat."

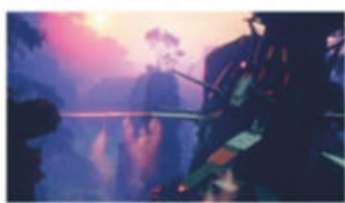
The Avalanche twist is that your close-combat abilities can be combined for more powerful – and flashy – attacks. Ground Slam, for instance, has you punch the ground to create a shockwave that throws enemies across the room. But that shockwave is more powerful if you activate Ground Slam in midair. If you jump into your own Vortex Grenade and let its explosion hurl you upwards, you can use the extra height for a massive slam that wreaks havoc on the enemies below.

BARRIER TO ENTRY

My session was set about 25% of the way through the campaign, but I was also shown a brief demo with some of the extra weapons and abilities that you'll use in the full game. One of them, Barrier, is a deployable energy shield that not only protects you from incoming bullets, but also shreds any enemies unfortunate enough to pass through it. This obviously

PLAYED IT

"WE ENCOURAGE YOU TO GET INTO THE FIGHT. THAT'S BY DESIGN"



➤ pairs well with both the Vortex Grenade and the Shatter palm strike attack, but also with the Grav Gun, which can tether enemies and fling them towards a position of your choosing.

The combo options suggest some fun ways to play, but in general abilities feel like they could use some fine-tuning. The way Ground Slam forces the first-person camera to look at the floor means it's difficult to aim, and also makes it hard to tell what you've actually done to enemies it hits. And when I lunged at an enemy with Shatter, more often than not they'd simply dodge out of the way. All abilities are on a cooldown timer, and wasting one is a disappointing way to break the flow of combat. I like how brash and loud the abilities all feel, but a little more finesse in the execution would go a long way.

Fortunately the gunplay feels more robust. Guns are chunky and impactful, and it's obvious this is one area where the collaboration with id has paid dividends. "The first-person feel is not necessarily just 'take all this code'," explains Willits. "It's more like a secret sauce. It's based on timing and setup and aspect ratios and depth of field – all sorts of small things that add up to get that id feel."

The most noticeable aspect of id's design philosophy is the audio design of the weapons, providing a chaotic, urgent pace to the flow of encounters. "I sat down with their sound designers and I said with weapons you always have to make the sound of the next thing above it," says Willits. "If you take the sound of a 9mm and put it in a videogame, it never sounds right. But if you [take the sound of] a .50 cal and call it a 9mm, *then* it sounds right. We use cannons and big explosions for the small weapons, and that's how you get that good feel. ... That's one of those things that id have learned over the years, and we've helped teach Avalanche."

Having won Mutant Bash, I head back to the town of Wellspring – here more colourful and more characterful than in the original game. As part of protagonist Walker's quest to take down The Authority, he must journey the world, looking for people connected to something called the Dagger Initiative. One such person is Loosum Hagar, mayor

of Wellspring and one of a few returning characters you'll meet in the game.

Loosum is prepared to work with Walker, but only if he infiltrates the headquarters of local gangster and rival Klegg Klayton – a ridiculous caricature obsessed with winning. His club is called the Winner's Lounge. It only serves winners. Fortunately for me, I just won a TV game show. During an initially friendly meeting – Klegg *really* likes winners – I manage to bug his office. But as I leave, he discovers I'm working with Loosum and traps me in the sewers – forcing me to fight through his army of goons.

Each character tied to the Dagger Initiative offers a series of upgrades, called Projects, that are unlocked with the Project Points earned by doing favours and completing quests. One of Loosum's early upgrades is Surprise Attack, which does five times the damage to unaware enemies. That's probably not the game-changer it might sound – stealth does not strike me as a focus of combat. But between Projects and the ability upgrades you earn by collecting Feltrite out in the world, *Rage 2* seems designed to let you nudge the combat towards a preferred playstyle.

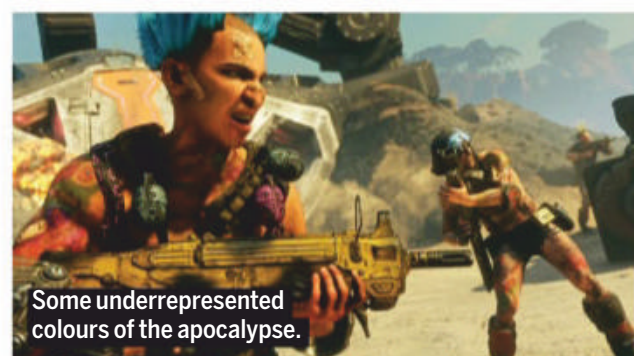
FURIOUS ROADS

Rather than return to Loosum after my sewer escape, I hop into my car and journey out into the world. While I don't make it far enough to experience the different biomes of the map – in addition to the standard post-apocalyptic wasteland, you'll also fight through swamps, mountains and forests – I do get to try a selection of activities. Some, like destroying the fuel supplies of a gas station overrun with bandits, are pure combat challenges. But there's stranger stuff out in the wasteland. I eventually find an Ark – a pre-apocalypse building that, in the one I explored, let me use gravity wells to launch myself into the air.

While basic combat is mostly entertaining – always a positive for an FPS – I don't yet have a sense of how varied the open world will prove. There are plenty of icons to explore, but some felt more like padding, and the vehicular combat encounters I stumbled into on my travels seemed basic and repetitive. While I took plenty of positives from my time with *Rage 2*, I also have concerns about whether its sense of style is masking a lack of substance. Hopefully it will prove to be more than just another solid shooter.

Phil Savage

Vehicular combat is pretty basic.



Some underrepresented colours of the apocalypse.

IN GENERAL ABILITIES FEEL LIKE THEY COULD USE SOME FINE-TUNING



Rage 2's residents have an odd
relationship with gravity.



PREVIEW

The Sinking City

This is not Reed's first spot of bother.



The flooded Oakmont has seen better days.



Using a boat is pretty much essential for commuting.

The Sinking City

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2019DEVELOPER
FrogwaresPUBLISHER
Bigben InteractiveLINK
www.thesinkingcity.com

THE SINKING CITY

Between Cthulhu and the deep blue sea, there's plenty to unspool

The sea and the sky trading places, Escher-esque architecture and the trout-pouted Innsmouthers that call it home – Oakmont's travel brochure would certainly be a sight to behold. Luckily its visitors are not looking for respite, least of all detective Charles Reed.

Reed is the only survivor of an obviously supernatural disaster. More archetype than distinct character, he occupies the role of 'man haunted (literally and metaphorically) by that past event'. Visions draw him to the waterlogged streets of *The Sinking City's* eerie town, slap-bang in the middle of Lovecraft country. Clearly the flooded corners of Oakmont hide more than just phantasms and tricks of the light.

After investigating a disappearance, Reed encounters Joy, the sole employee of Oakmont's library. Through lips that have been sewn shut and pained whispers, she tells him she has been dealing with an unwelcome visitor. As with many of the investigations available to Reed, you can decline to help her. In this instance though, doing so feels cruel. Agreeing to assist, Reed gets an address from Joy, and off he trudges.

A boat ride later (because of the 'sinking' part of *The Sinking City*), Reed finds Joy's apartment building in disarray. A still smouldering camera occupies one corner and there's a pile of bloody giblets in another. Perhaps even more disturbing is the empty dog bed. A bloody sewing

machine and alarmingly fleshy teddy bear tell the rest of that horrific tale in entertainingly over-the-top fashion.

FROM THE DRINK

For a few moments the world goes grey, taking on a visceral texture. There are hints of a kind of sanity management system, although I'm not sure what form that will take in the full game. Once the effect abates Reed starts his investigation. In case you hadn't guessed from the teddy, this is not a subtle crime scene. Reed spots a bloody symbol smeared nearby and draws a connection between what happened here and a prior disappearance case.

Reed has the ability to see patches of the past, letting you try to piece a chain of events together. He sees someone sewing up the meat-teddy as they sing creepy rhymes to themselves. As the strange visitor accosts Joy's pup, they're distracted by a camera flash from next door. This gives Reed a lead to follow, but no one appears to be home.

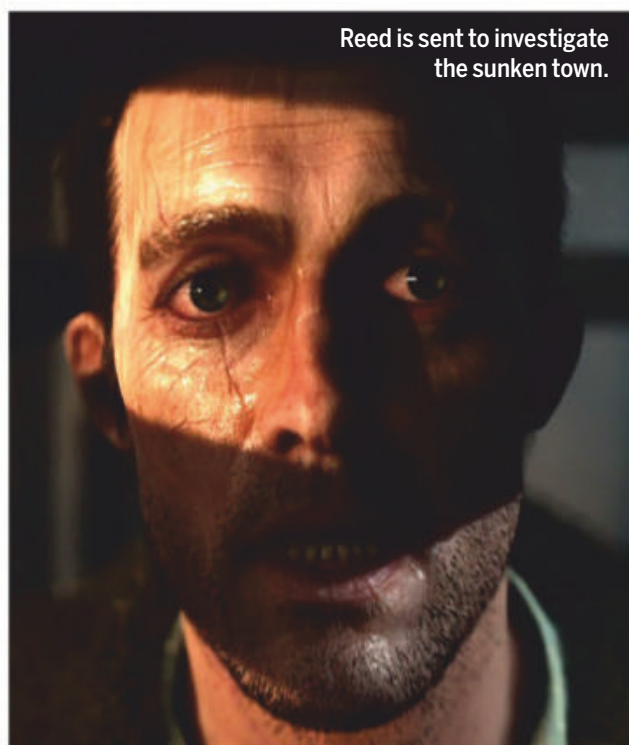
Reed has another trick up his sleeve though. Entering concentration mode, he can figure out a possible way in and soon winds up in a cellar of horrors. After a costly firefight with a few too-many-limbed creatures, concentration mode comes in handy again for dispelling illusions that would otherwise trick the town's denizens. Reed eventually finds a key for the flat above.

He finds Joy's neighbour in no fit state to answer questions. However, his journal drops more than a few hints as to the wider lore surrounding Oakmont and the identity of Joy's uninvited visitor – the cryptic cryptid Granny Weaver.

Players will be able to give Reed himself more of a sense of personality through dialogue choices. For example, you can tell Joy later that her dog has been killed, and there's an option to share all the grisly facts (what is wrong with you?) or spare her the grim details.

This build still looked a bit rough round the edges, and Reed is a tough chap to invest in. *The Sinking City* caught my eye because it seemed to riff on Lovecraft tales rather than recreate them. I hope the remaining months of development can bring that quality out.

Jessica Kinghorn

FIRST
LOOK

Reed is sent to investigate the sunken town.

THE FLOODED CORNERS OF OAKMONT ARE STALKED BY MORE THAN JUST PHANTASMS

THE STILLNESS OF THE WIND

A slowly unfurling rural tale

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

"When the goats are ready"

DEVELOPER

Memory of God, Lambic Studios

PUBLISHER

Fellow Traveller

LINK

www.bit.ly/StillnessOfWind

The *Stillness of the Wind*, while not an ear-grabbing name, is instantly recognisable as the work of Coyan Cardenas. It's actually an expanded version of his contemplative 2017 game, *Where the Goats Are*, and uses the same rich palette of yellows and oranges, flecked with turquoise, to sketch a remote farmstead and its lone inhabitant, Talma.

At the start *The Stillness of the Wind* presents a rural idyll of sorts, where you guide Talma through a daily routine of gardening, milking goats, collecting eggs, making cheese and chatting to a pedlar who pops by to barter or drop off mail.

But the shotgun leaning against the wall of the outhouse speaks to a certain degree of hardship or threat. It's soon joined by other signs that all is not well: The letters from Talma's relations are fraught, she's having strange dreams about goats, and the chickens seem to have disappeared.

The letters – the vehicle for the world's broader story – can veer into telling rather than showing, their artificiality breaking the delicate spell cast by the gradual changes in Talma's world. But balancing necessary tasks, your own desires, and any tiny change in resources creates a really interesting slow-burning tension. And it looks stunning.

Philippa Warr

PLAYED IT



UNLEASH YOUR INNER SAMURAI



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FHD

1_{ms}

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RELEASE
2019DEVELOPER
No CodePUBLISHER
Devolver DigitalLINK
www.nocodestudio.com

OBSERVATION

Things get weird in No Code's stylish sci-fi thriller

Dr. Emma Fisher is having a bad day. Her space station, which is supposed to orbit the Earth, is now floating near Saturn. The rest of the crew are missing. Things keep breaking down. And SAM, the station's soft-voiced AI assistant, seems to have become self aware. But here's the cool thing: you control SAM, and so you are, essentially, his self awareness.



Last time I played *Observation*, a new game from the creators of horror anthology *Stories Untold*, it was a pretty gentle introduction to the idea of being an AI. For the first hour, Fisher doesn't even know her station has drifted away from Earth quite so severely. And so you help her restore power, open doors, and fix problems around the station.

But when the grim truth of her predicament becomes clear, things get more intense. I play another section from later in the game and Fisher is visibly more desperate, but still holding it together. She picks up an orb-shaped drone and transfers SAM to it, which allows me to float around the station. I have freedom of movement, using little jet thrusters to propel myself through the zero gravity corridors of the station.

I can still leap instantly between static cameras – and that's actually a quicker and more convenient way to get around – but this drone lets me study things up close. I float my way into the quarters of one of the missing crew and scan their personal laptop, reading emails and listening to audio logs. I'm told that a lot of

PLAYED
IT

the story in *Observation* will be conveyed this way, and you'll have to do some investigation if you want to decipher all of its mysteries.

The station is based on the International Space Station, and so there's no clear 'up' or 'down', which makes navigating with the drone quite tricky. It takes me a while to get my head around the space, and I keep bumping into things, which makes the screen stutter and glitch. Eventually I find a device that Fisher wants me to activate to help her restore power to part of the station.

When I interact with the device, a strange, impenetrable computer interface appears on the screen, and Fisher tells SAM that she has no idea how to use it. And this is where my first puzzle comes into play. If you played *Stories Untold* you'll know that developer No Code loves complicated puzzles that have you reaching for a notebook, and *Observation* is no different.

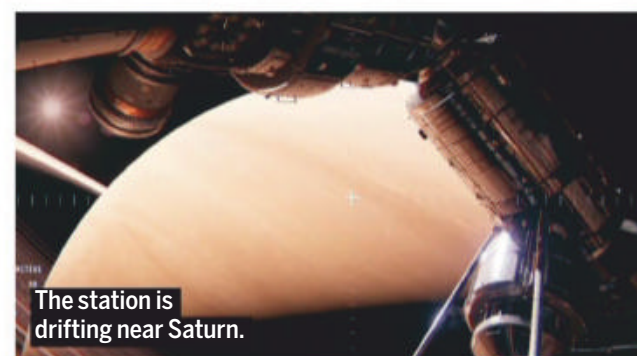
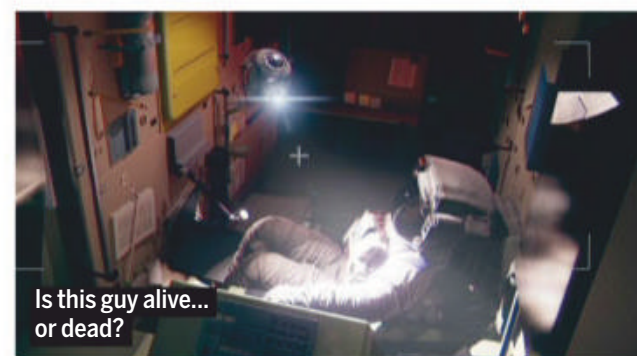
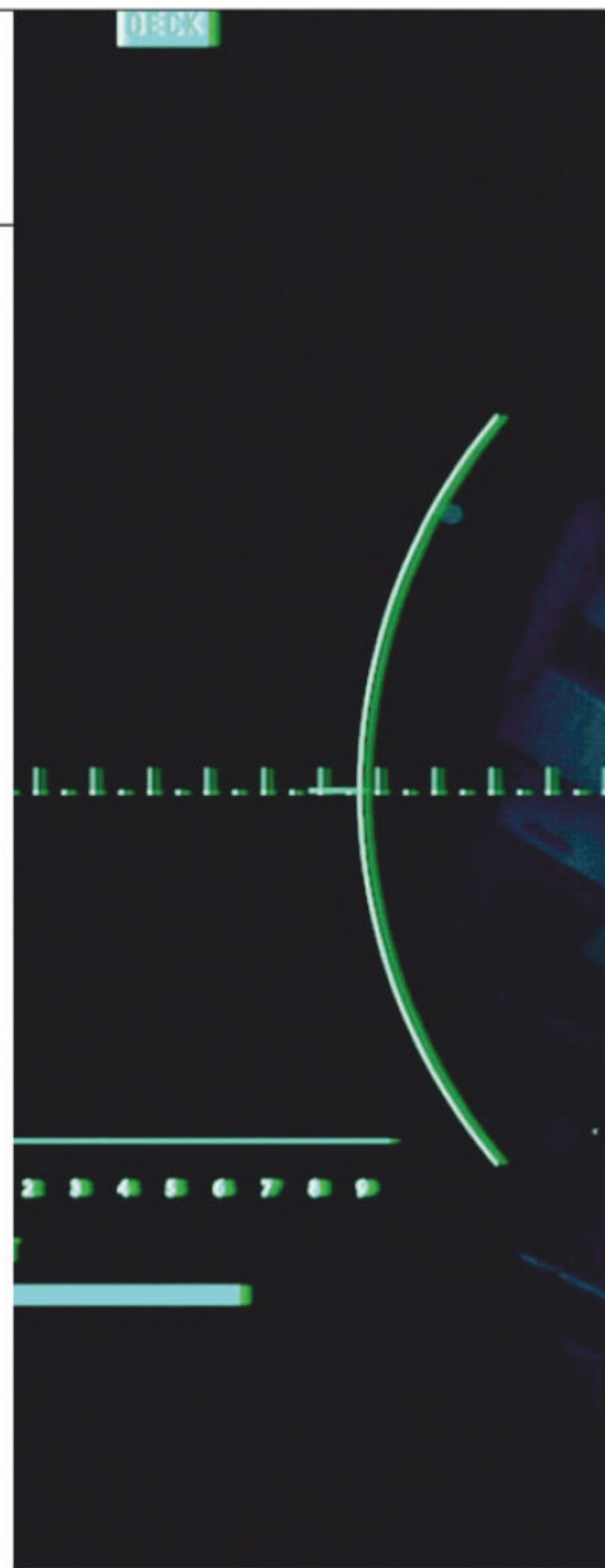
But I like how this reinforces the fiction, because these interfaces were never designed for people to operate. It helps sell the idea that you're controlling a semi-sentient AI, and not a human. The director, Jon McKellan, whose background is in designing user interfaces, tells me he's purposefully breaking established UI design rules in the game for this very reason.

MAPPED OUT

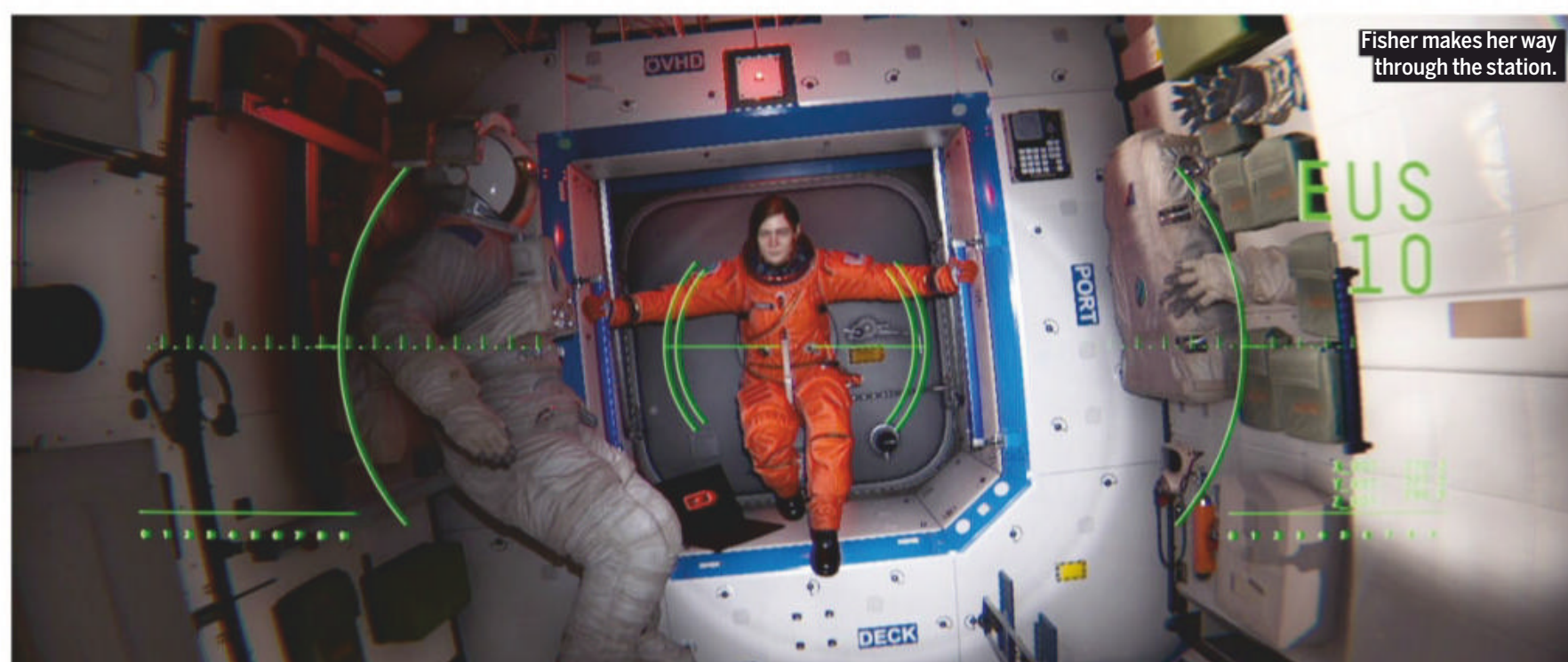
At any time I can bring up a schematic of the station listing active cameras and switch between them. And if the drone is near one of the cameras I can take control of it. I ask McKellan if he's worried people will just want to stay in the drone all the time, but he says that it's actually a rather slow and clumsy means of transport, and using the cameras is more efficient overall.

After helping Fisher with various tasks around the station, something really strange happens – but I think it's best if I let you discover it for yourself when the game is released. There was a touch of the paranormal about it, and I was not expecting that at all. And so another demo ends and I'm extremely desperate to play more of this very weird and very interesting sci-fi game.

Andy Kelly



I HAVE FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT, USING THRUSTERS TO PROPEL MYSELF



Anno 1800



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

February 26, 2019

DEVELOPER

Blue Byte

PUBLISHER

Ubisoft

LINK

www.bit.ly/ubianno1800

ANNO 1800

Blue Byte's city-building series takes on the industrial revolution

It was all going well until my potato farm exploded. There I was, erecting a few villager houses on the outskirts of my burgeoning mill town, when suddenly, ka-blam! Fire and mash everywhere. I'm still somewhat mystified by this turn of events. I mean, how do you blow up a potato farm?

The scene is chaos. People are screaming, and several buildings have caught fire. I deploy the volunteer fire brigade to douse the conflagration, but the local newspaper pounces with a front page story on my 'inadequate' response to the potato farm explosion. The one that occurred five minutes ago and was the least predictable event in history.

I could edit the paper to make myself look better, but as an advocate of press freedom, I let the rag publish. My city's productivity plummets, and with it my income. I spend a while clawing my way back into the black, all because of some surprise chips.

It's elements like this that make *Anno 1800* such an intriguing city-builder. It takes place on the cusp of the industrial revolution, a time of great social, political and economic upheaval. It's mainly a placid, enjoyable affair, but like those radically changing times, there's always a sense that you're one potato explosion away from disaster.

It's also a game of impressive infrastructural depth. Your city evolves not just in size but through time. You start out building a glorified farming village. Then,

gradually, your stone farmhouses are converted into brick worker tenements, and your infrastructure grows to accommodate brickmakers, steelworks and sausage factories.

The strategic side largely takes the form of establishing production chains. Goods need to go through multiple stages of production, so it's wise to build your textile mills and sailmakers close to your sheep farms, for example. All goods are stored in a warehouse and sold at markets, so it's important to build plenty of both building types.

Unlike the clean but cold *Anno 2205*, *Anno 1800* also has an eye for the human side of city-building. Whether playing in sandbox or the campaign, it's up to you how you treat your workforce. You can prioritise happiness at the cost of a slower production rate or grind the proles beneath your millstone for greater profit. Choosing the latter option comes at the risk of civil unrest, however, as workers can unionise and ultimately strike.

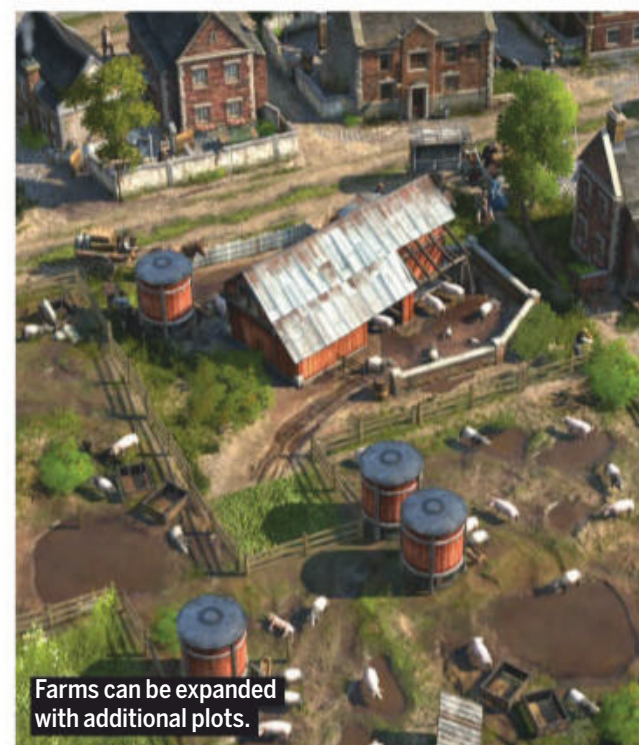
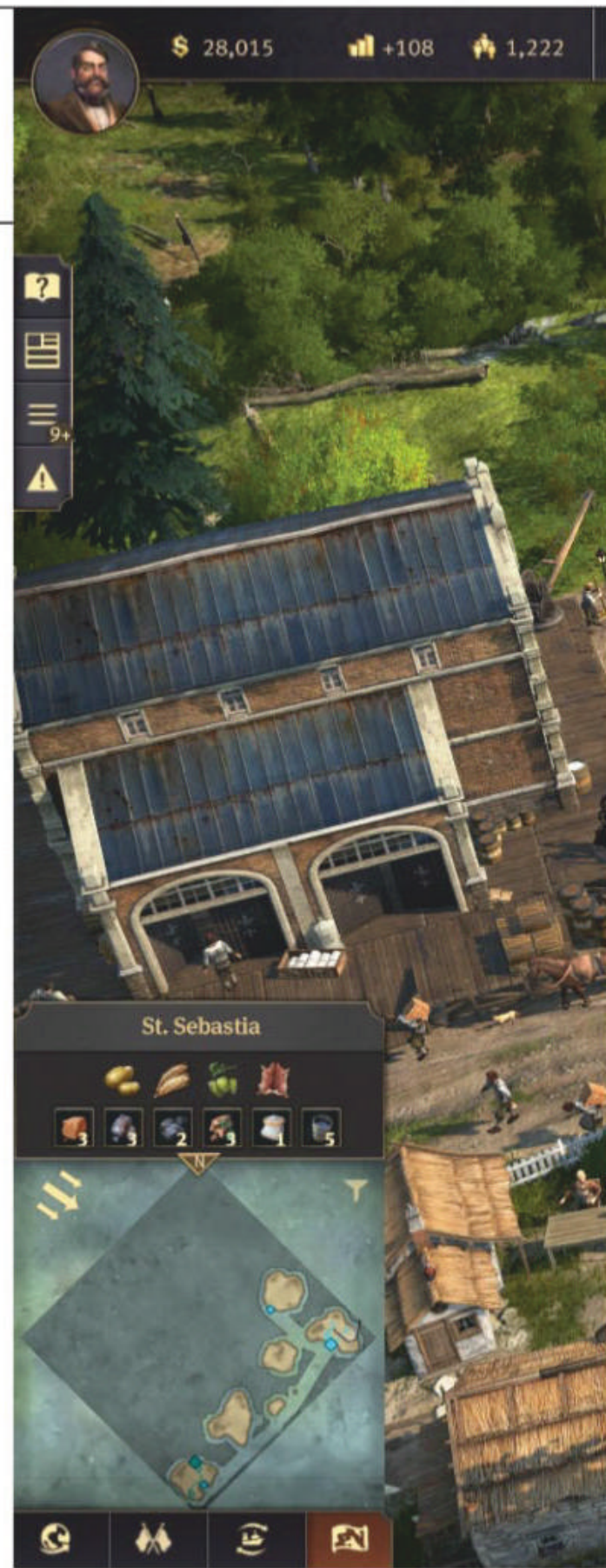
Other outside factors that can influence your city's progress include trade, war and pollution. *Anno 1800* also has a maritime component, letting you build fleets to explore the map and trade with other city states which are themed around different nationalities. There's no land combat in *Anno 1800*, but fleets can fight each other in 3D battles, in which pre-industrial sailing vessels can trade cannon fire with ironclad steamships.

CATCHING FIRE

Anno 1800 feels like a richer, more lavish and more human game than *Anno 2205*. But there are a few concerns. Your citizens don't seem to interact with infrastructure much, so it doesn't matter where you place different types of housing for different kinds of workers, only that you have sufficient housing. Also, economic management is somewhat obscure. It's not hard to set up production chains, but if you're losing money, it can be difficult to figure out where the problem lies.

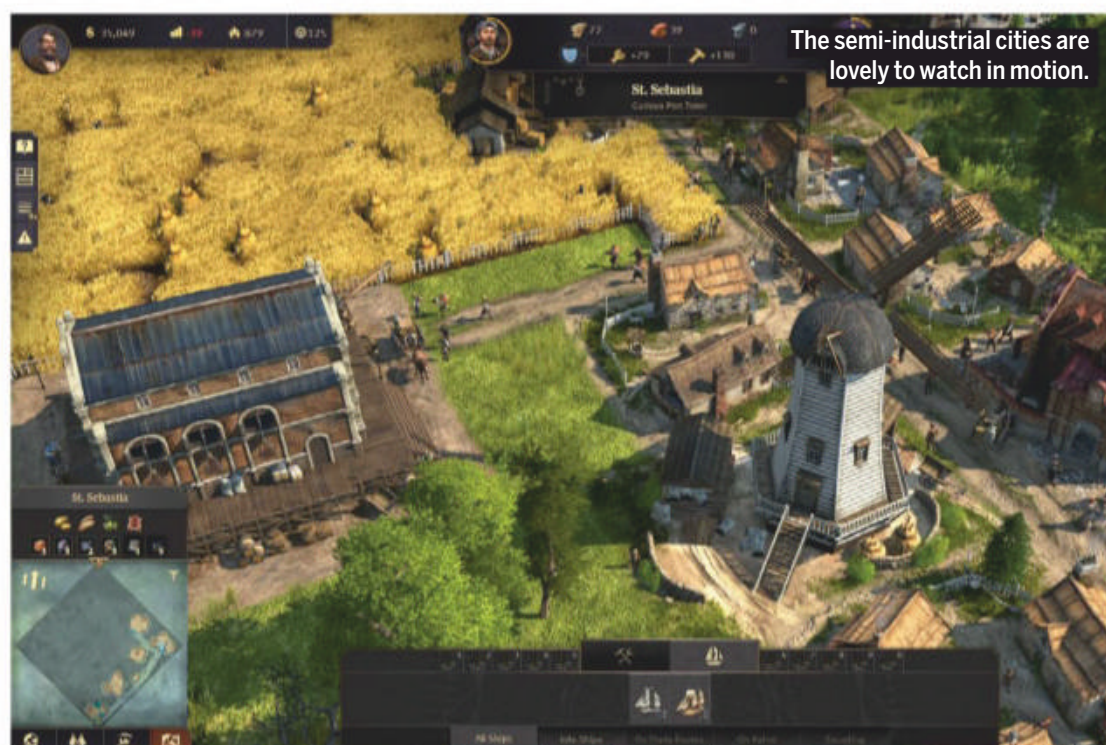
With so many games due out in February and March, *Anno 1800* was barely on my radar. But playing it has left me with a hunger for more, as well as a curious craving for crisps.

Rick Lane



Farms can be expanded with additional plots.

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PREVIEW

Jumpgrid

Do not touch these brick outline things.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Early 2019

DEVELOPER
Ian MacLarty

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
ianmaclarty.com/jumpgrid

JUMPGRID

Teleportation meets dancing in this arcade rhythm dodger

I can't decide whether I hate *Jumpgrid's* ultra-precise guts or I want to impress it. *Jumpgrid* (being an intense grid-based teleport-dance game by Ian MacLarty and not a person in its own right) doesn't give a fig what I think. It just sits on my hard drive, taunting me with its mere existence and giving me horrible *Super Hexagon* flashbacks.

PLAYED
IT

Jumpgrid gives you three vertical lines and three horizontal lines. Where they intersect they form a 3x3 grid. On eight of those intersections there are rotating cubes that you must collect to open the wormhole in the middle and get to the next grid. All you need to do is warp from point to point along one of those lines, pick up the cubes, and skidaddle down a space tube. It's so simple. And yet.

Passing over the top of this grid are an array of fast-moving shapes which you have to avoid or you'll instantly reset the grid. The fact that you warp from point to

point instead of sliding is key here, because it allows you to hop from one side of a moving obstacle to the other as it passes overhead. Adding to the complexity is the fact you can warp off one side of the grid and appear on the other – you'll need that for avoiding wide or fast obstacles where you can't move to one of the naturally adjacent points.

As MacLarty puts it, "Success requires only a few seconds of precision finger gymnastics, but touch any of the pulsing hazards and the level instantly resets, ready for you to try again, and again, and again." It's probably more accurate to say, "Success requires you pass from a state of panic into one of controlled fear as thumping music plays and objects whirl until you eventually hit some kind of

**"PICK UP THE CUBES
AND SKIDADDLE DOWN
A SPACE TUBE. IT'S SO
SIMPLE. AND YET"**

rhythm and experience the joy of actual skill for the exact amount of time it takes to collect eight blobs, then you're back to being fumble-fingered trash."

I mean, why are my fingers so bad? Why can I never remember to disappear off the edge of the grid when it matters? How are these levels even possible?

REPEAT OFFENDER

It reminds me of MacLarty's earlier game, *Boson X*: an endless runner set in a particle accelerator. That too involved precision movements, flashing lights and an insistent soundtrack. Crucially, both games pair that precision and stimulation with frictionless restarts. In *Boson X* you just hit the space bar and you're off again, speeding through the accelerator. With *Jumpgrid* it restarts the level for you. It's easier to keep playing than to quit.

Jumpgrid – or at least the prerelease build I've played – is that combination of simple, glorious and infuriating which can tank my productivity. I guess what I'm trying to say is: SEND HELP! I've fallen into a game and can't get out.

Philippa Warr

Digital Camera PHOTOGRAPHER OF THE YEAR 2019

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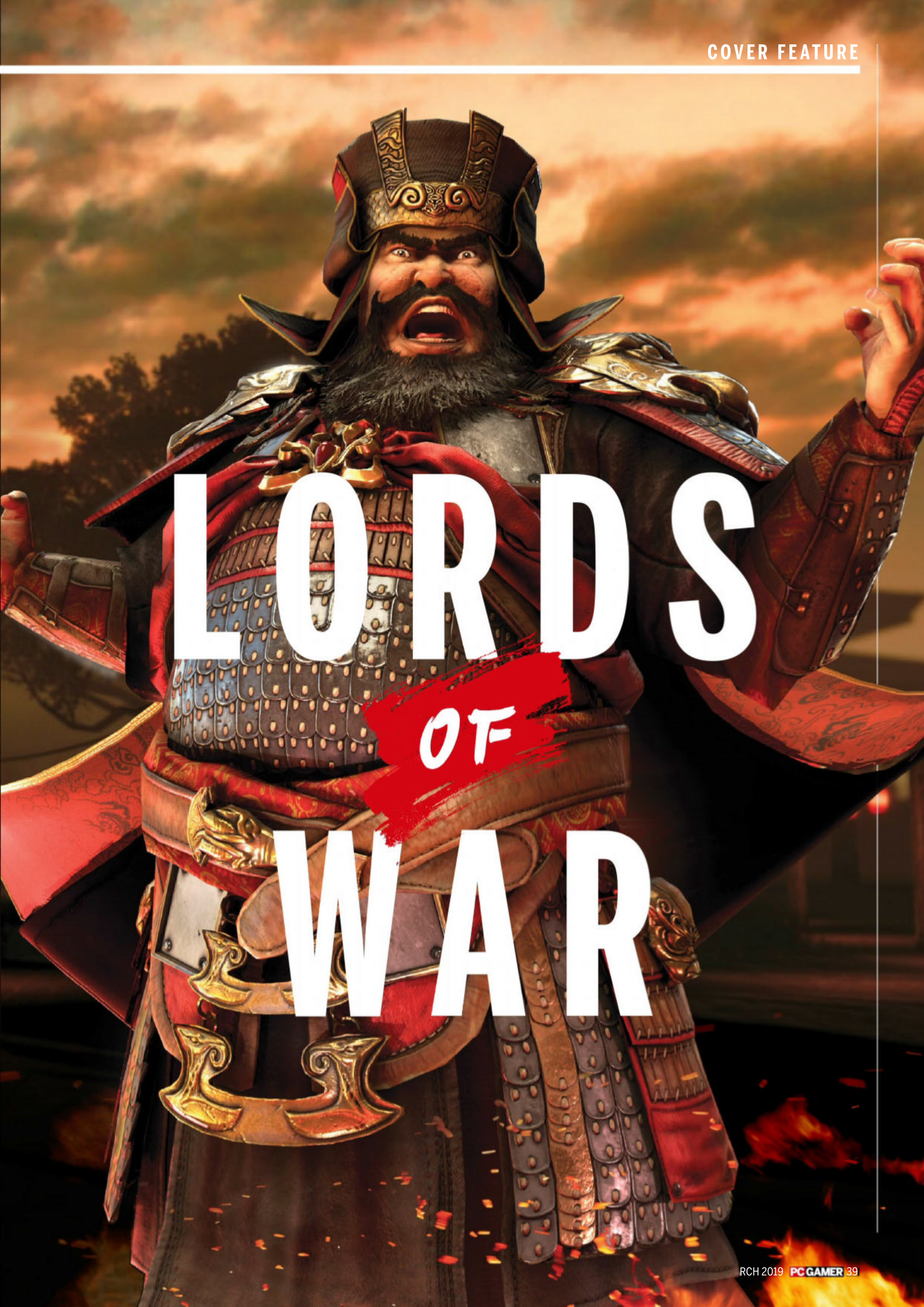
DONG ZHOU IS A BAD MAN.

THE 11 PLAYABLE
WARLORDS OF **TOTAL WAR:**
THREE KINGDOMS ARE
DIVIDED INTO CATEGORIES
WHEN YOU START A
CAMPAIGN.

DONG ZHOU HAS A
CATEGORY ALL TO HIMSELF
CALLED, SIMPLY, TYRANT.



By Tom Senior



LORDS OF WAR

COVER FEATURE

Total War: Three Kingdoms

The *Three Kingdoms* campaign is set in ancient China, 190 AD. The Han dynasty has collapsed and Dong Zhou has captured the child emperor. Now the warlord lurks in the palace, bullying anyone who stands against him. Every cruel overlord needs a Darth Vader, so Dong Zhou convinces the greatest warrior in the land, Lü Bu, to slay his own foster father and become Dong's enforcer and heir. The resulting family dynamic is... difficult.

At a glance, the *Total War* formula appears unchanged. On the turn-based campaign map you guide your faction's research, upgrade settlements with new buildings, conduct diplomacy, and move armies around like pawns to capture enemy settlements. When armies clash, you can take charge of your forces in huge real-time battles set in gorgeous battlefields. However, after a few turns, I discover that there is a lot more to think about. How do I keep Lü Bu's arrogance in check? How can I negotiate safe passage for my armies with a nearby warlord, so I can crush an uprising of the yellow turban rebellion? How do I hold off the remnants of the Han dynasty and their allies to the east and the south?

BELOW: Dong Zhou here, demanding that someone immediately bring him a sandwich.

The alliances of the era are so tumultuous that Creative Assembly has had to rebuild *Total War's* entire diplomacy and AI system almost from scratch. In addition to typical military alliances you can form coalitions that don't tie you into complete military co-operation. There are different flavours of vassalage too, and many new ways to undermine and betray other warlords. The diplomacy screen lets you trade goods, alliances, military access and treasures in a detailed tit-for-tat exchange. For a few turns of my game several warlords approached me about acquiring a lovely clay bear I managed to plunder. I gave it away for a series of regular payments and put the money into trebuchets.

"The previous system in previous titles was a little bit too old now," says associate designer Nicholas Graber. "We applied so many patches, so many improvements, we basically wanted to rewrite it.

"So we have a new diplomacy system which is supported by a mostly data-driven AI. It makes development much easier and faster as well. Apart from, obviously,

offering a lot more options, it gives us a lot more flexibility. We can come up with new diplomatic options and implement them much quicker."

It might seem odd to bring a strong diplomatic focus to a game called *'Total War'*, but *Three Kingdoms* is interested in different notions of how power really works. For Dong Zhou, it's bullish authoritarianism, backed up by military might. But if you play as Cao Cao you're a master of manipulation. You can turn heroes in other factions against one another, and specialise in using spies to create civil wars. Some warlords are good at bringing people together in alliances, which becomes useful later in the campaign as warlords ally to form huge factions.

ZERO TO HERO

Your goal is to ultimately unify China under your warlord's banner, but in this period China is shattered into fragments of territory. Historically, a period of fierce localised scrapping led to the emergence of the three kingdoms: Wei, Wu and Shu. The leading figures of the period were captured in Luo Guanzhong's epic 14th-century novel, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. This is the version of the history we see featured most often in games. *Total War: Three Kingdoms* aims to strike a balance between *Romance* and history with characters that are powerful, but not outright magical.

"ANCIENT CHINA IS ALMOST THE PERFECT SETTING FOR *TOTAL WAR*"

"Ancient China is almost the perfect setting for a *Total War* game, in a lot of ways," says writer and narrative designer Peter Stewart, "because of the scope of the whole thing. 30 million people died over the course of it, and when you're making a game about war, that's seems like a perfect setting.

"And then there are the characters as well, who all step into this vacuum of power that's created when the Han dynasty collapses, which is exactly what we wanted to focus on: how those characters defined the era."

Heroes have personality traits and they can form relationships with other heroes they fight alongside (or





against) in battle. In time disagreements can become outright rivalries and heroes can defect to join another faction or create their own. The devs say that you will probably be able to let lesser heroes go, but betrayal from major characters in your faction – heirs, and others who hold titles – may prove devastating to your campaign. The relationship system works in the other direction, too. If two best friends go into battle and one of them dies, the other may fly into a rage for the rest of the fight, and enter a period of mourning after the battle.

You even build armies around your heroes. You can have three in an army and each can head to the field and takes a retinue of up to six units

of your choice into battle. Heroes come in five flavours. Strategists can debuff enemies, commanders can encourage allies and reinforce a line, vanguard heroes are good fighters who can disrupt a line, sentinels mostly refuse to die, and champions excel at hunting down enemy heroes and duelling them to death.

Given how powerful they are, it pays to have your leaders in the right place at the right time. In Lü Bu's case, that's in the midst of a hundred enemy archers hunting down their general.

A battle to take back a fishing village south of my empire has escalated quickly, and I have just realised that I'm heading for a direct clash with Cao Cao in nearby

ABOVE: China's natural environmental variety has inspired the prettiest campaign map yet.



territory. Lü Bu is working alongside a commander who gives nice boosts to my archers and lets them use flaming arrows, and a strategist who stands around looking regal a safe distance away from the fight. Though your army is organised into three retinues, you're free to command all of your units however you wish – they don't have to stay near their hero. I push up my flame arrow archers and instruct my trebuchets to sling buckets of what the description text charitably calls 'ichor'.

Then I unleash Lü Bu. I have hidden him in a forest on the right flank, with a couple of units of cavalry. They burst from the trees and slam into the enemy's contingent of archers, sending men flying. I select Lü Bu, click on the 'duel' command and challenge their leader to a one-on-one fight to the death.

He accepts. The archers and my cavalry back away and form a respectful circle to give the two

heroes space. Lü Bu charges, but his attack is deflected. He jumps off his horse and engages in some spectacular

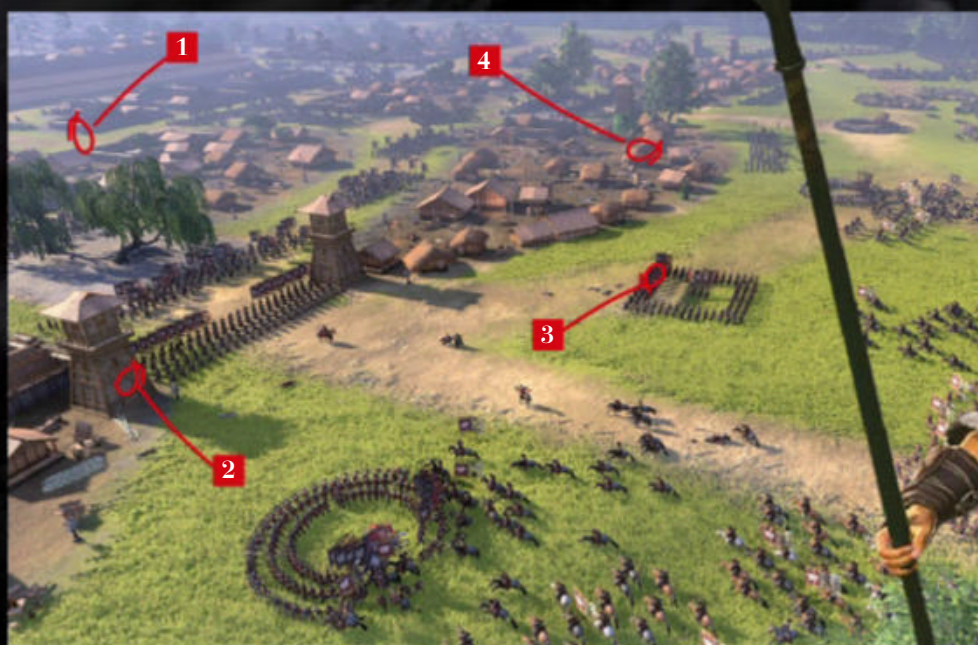
SIEGE MENTALITY *Some settlements won't go down easily*

1 To take the town attackers must rout the defenders or capture a zone at the town's heart.

2 Guard towers provide fire support to defenders, helping them to fend off larger numbers.

3 Some heroes unlock special formations for certain units.

4 Settlements catch fire as attackers breach the outer line.





» martial arts action. The fight goes back and forth. One minute Lü Bu has the upper hand, the next he's sent flying by a counter-kick to the stomach. I suddenly realise I have a battle to run, so I zoom the camera back out and tell my trebuchets to target their demoralising poop buckets at the fight near the duel.

With a thrust of his weapon Lü Bu finishes the fight and charges into the archers. I don't remember a part of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms where Lü Bu bests a hundred men in a shower of shite, but *Total War* is all about making your own stories.

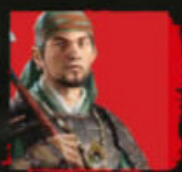
The enemy morale breaks and they flee the field, but not before my strategist is mobbed and killed. The heroes talk to one another throughout, so I can tell the cocksure Lü Bu didn't especially like my strategist. It may have seemed to him that the strategist wasn't working hard, but with help from my commander hero, he held the line in the face of greater numbers while Lü

LEAGUE OF LEGENDS *Meet a few of your warlord rivals*



YUAN SHAO

Class: Commander
Likes: De-escalating conflict with his gaze
Dislikes: The power of Dong Zhou



ZHANG YAN

Class: Champion
Likes: Moving through woods quickly
Dislikes: His poor starting position



ZHENG JIANG

Class: Champion
Likes: Banditry and extortion
Dislikes: That the Han dynasty isn't on fire yet



KONG RONG

Class: Strategist
Likes: Destroying you in a battle of wits
Dislikes: Being destroyed in a battle of swords

Bu was charging around breaking the enemy. Before battles even start, as the game loads, characters chat about their chances in the fight ahead. I'm sure the lines will eventually become rote, but it demonstrates how much CA want heroes to be more than a series of stats pages.

With the battle done, I'm free to face off against Cao Cao. I've played three hours of two campaigns, one



with Dong Zhou, and another with the oathsworn brothers Liu Bei, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei. I found that your warlords affect your approach to the entire campaign, not just battles. Dong Zhou has the emperor, which means he has a legitimate claim to a lot of territory. He also has his own resource: intimidation. When you raze settlements and execute heroes you earn intimidation points,

Total War: Three Kingdoms

YOUR WARLORDS AFFECT YOUR APPROACH TO THE ENTIRE CAMPAIGN



"It was one of our main goals to make the AI a real threat to the player," says Graber. "I wouldn't say we made the AI much more aggressive, but it's more active than before. If you have bad relations with the AI you should be prepared for a war. Once a war declaration happens, you should be prepared for an actual attack and lots of battles. We wanted to make sure the AI follows through. The war declaration should be followed by battles."

And so I find myself facing Cao Cao to the south of my empire. Though Lü Bu had ensured victory at the fishing village I'd taken losses. My army is at half strength and I'm down a strategist. In a fit of frankly terrible strategic decision-making I decide to put Dong Zhou himself into my army, partly to see the big man in battle alongside his violent foster son Lü Bu, and partly because he can take a couple more trebuchets in his retinue. Maybe I'll select the option to fling rotten horses at the enemy this time instead, to fatigue Cao Cao into submission.

This does not work. As I try to take another settlement to the south Cao Cao's huge army attacks. The pre-battle screen tells me it's hopeless. My chances are zero. I retreat my army, put them into marching stance, and instruct them to run as fast as they can up the river.

LEFT: Heroes can eventually unlock elite units.

BELOW: This would be a picturesque scene if it weren't for all the war.

It's too late. Cao Cao's army runs me down and defeats my army easily. Then a series of messages pop up. This is what it looks like when an empire implodes in *Total War: Three Kingdoms*.

One: my brutal ruler Dong Zhou is captured by Cao Cao. Two: Cao Cao executes my brutal ruler Dong Zhou. Three: Lü Bu is the new brutal ruler

which you can cash in during contact with other warlords to essentially bully them into saying yes. Writer and narrative designer Pete Stewart refers to this as the moment you slam your sword on the table and ask them to rethink their life choices.

FAMILY MATTERS

The brothers start in a very different position. They have no territory, and must scrape back some holdings from the yellow turban rebellion – a vast peasant uprising that was brutally crushed at the time. Though they lack land, their coalition is the most powerful starting army in the game, thanks to the three heroes that lead it. Still, it's tough to cling on to a scrap of territory as warlords vie for power around you. In both campaigns civil unrest and enemy attacks made it difficult to get a foothold. It's a symptom of the AI's proactive stance. Other warlords get in touch to ask for favours, or to try to bully you for goods or territory.





LEFT: The campaign map now has a day/night cycle.

IT'S A CHANCE TO TAKE THE EVENTS OF HISTORY IN A DIFFERENT DIRECTION ENTIRELY

» of my empire. Four: senior figures in my administration, Guo Si and Li Jue, hate Lü Bu and have decided to defect and form their own faction. Five: a civil war has broken out and is tearing my territory in two. Oh, and the yellow turban rebellion is there, too, burning things down and causing a fuss.

I have a feeling Cao Cao may be one of the more powerful warlords in the game, as he should be. Creative Assembly has a fun way of testing the balance between warlords. As you're reading this, there's a chance that some computers deep inside Creative Assembly HQ are waging war against themselves. The developers call it 'autotesting'. The AI battles itself, and CA harvests the data to make balance tweaks and check that the shape of the campaign is to their liking.

REBEL ALLIANCE

"What we see in the first half of the game is power groups emerging from coalitions and alliances," says Graber, "and these power groups are usually at war with each other. In the later stages of the game you have multiple emperors facing each other; self-proclaimed emperors trying to

beat each other. That's the boss fight, in a sense."

It turns out I've only seen the chaotic opening stages of a *Three Kingdoms* campaign. The really big fights happen later on, once huge power blocs have formed. Though it's a true sandbox, Creative Assembly hopes that campaigns will tend to result in three huge factions led by wannabe emperors.

"There's a lot of data we can look through and see how different factions perform," Graber explains, "which one's the strongest at the moment, which one dominates too much, so we try to balance it of course."

"The biggest factor that we obviously can't take into account in that specific testing scenario is the player. The player can take out our strongest faction in the autotest straight away in the game and suddenly the game the player will have is completely different to what we're seeing in testing."

I ask the team if the yellow turban rebellion ever wins. Everybody laughs. The peasant revolt was brutally suppressed in the years leading up to *Three Kingdoms*'s 190 AD start date. Now it's a preorder bonus faction in a videogame in 2019. History is hard on the losers.

My time with the campaign runs out. I could have spent ten hours trying to undo the mess I'd made, but I came away realising I'd made too many mistakes. For most players, I think the start of a *Three Kingdoms* campaign is going to be completely baffling. There are so many warlords and characters to understand, and though the information you need is right there on character screens, it takes effort to process it all and get a sense of where you stand with your neighbours. The game gives you some starting missions to provide focus, but I can see myself having to play a few abortive campaigns before I really start to get a sense of how heroes' personalities play into the game's sandbox.

There's so much more I've yet to properly explore. The Wu Xing philosophy of five elements runs through the entire game. Every hero and building upgrade matches the colours of water, wood, fire, earth and metal. Some elements are complimentary, others work against each other. The designers use champions and strategists as an example. Red, fiery champions are destructive forces on the battlefield, but they are doused by the draining abilities of a blue water strategist. The effect is subtle – these heroes of Chinese legend aren't Pokémon, after



GEAR OF WAR

Looking after your warlords

- 1 Equip heroes with different gear and mounts to make them more powerful.
- 2 Assign followers to improve your warlords' performance.
- 3 Level them up and use skill points unlock new abilities on their skill tree.
- 4 Give them titles and assignments to keep them happy, and loyal.



all – but CA is using the framework to make the game instinctively readable, and to bring nuance to *Three Kingdoms'* presentation.

ELEMENTAL

It's worth mentioning how beautiful *Three Kingdoms* is. This is the best looking *Total War* to date. The tech tree is a tree painted on canvas. When you unlock a node – a taxation bonus, or a military mustering boost – that section of the tree bursts into pink blossom. The UI has been reworked to be more elegant, with splashes of blank ink that evoke the brushstrokes of Chinese calligraphy. The map fades into a watercolour painting as you zoom out.

The warlords' character portraits even reflect their nuanced elemental alignments. Lead character artist Mauro Bonelli talks about how colours and motifs in a character's

clothing express their character. Cao Cao is shown in ambiguous colours that could reflect stone, wood or metal – fitting for a masterful manipulator – but with flashes of red that imply military prowess.

And what about Dong Zhou? Historically, he was killed by his foster son Lü Bu, but what if he managed to keep his retinue in check? He may well have extended his reach and brought all of China under his tyrannical rule. That's the promise of *Total War*, it's a chance to take the events of history in a different direction entirely. Close the magazine and take a look at the image of Dong Zhou on our front cover. This man who would raze a town or execute an official without a second thought. If he came into your home, demanded fealty and slammed his sword down on the table, would you say no? ■

When you capture a hero you can execute them, release them or convince them to join you.



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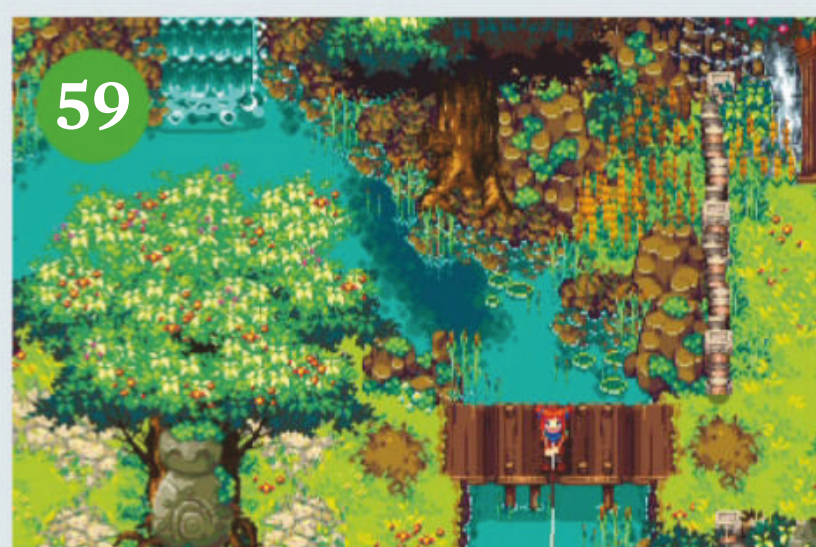
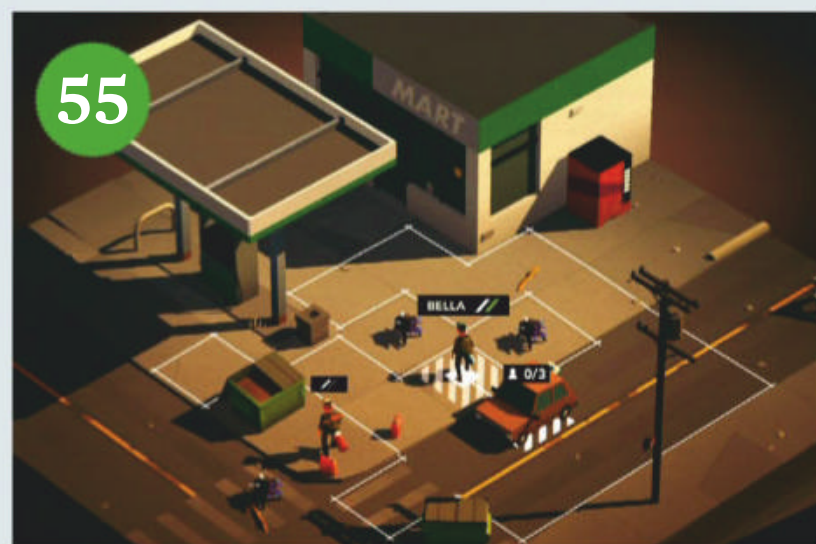
PC GAMER

THE BEST OF EARLY ACCESS

Here are some of PC Gamer's favourite games that aren't quite done yet.

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“Not using a microphone is a pretty big crime here”

SQUAD is a large-scale military shooter with added realism. *By Andy Kelly*

Project Reality is a popular mod for *Battlefield 2* that places a greater emphasis on teamwork and makes it more realistic. *Squad*, developed by former members of *Project Reality*'s core development team, is an attempt to make a standalone game in the same mould. The result is a shooter that isn't as accessible and explosive as *Battlefield*, nor as intricate and sim-like as *Arma*. It's somewhere in between, and it wears it well.

Like *Battlefield*, *Squad* has large maps, combined arms and a focus on objective play. But within this huge, writhing mass of war are smaller squads, communicating, working under a leader and dismantling the enemy's grip on the map piece by piece. Well, that's the idea anyway. If a team isn't communicating or doing what the squad leader asks, they won't make much of a dent in the battle. This is not a game for lone wolves.

It's remarkable how a relatively small indie team has created something, in terms of scale, on par with *Battlefield*. The production values are much lower, of course, and it looks a little dated in places. But it makes up for this by being a thoroughly enjoyable and deep tactical shooter. Bullets obey the laws of physics, there's no minimap, no automatically spotting enemies and no external vehicle cameras.

I like how most players take *Squad* seriously, investing themselves in the experience in a manner that you don't often see in mainstream shooters such as *Battlefield*. Squad leaders bark grid references and issue orders, marking a shared map with icons and instructions. Having to pull up your map with M to monitor the battlefield feels much more immersive than blindly following HUD markers and constantly eyeing a minimap.

Leaders can also build forward operating bases (or FOBs) with help from their squad, delivering building supplies with logistics vehicles and ultimately creating spawn points, defences such as barbed wire and

sandbags, and powerful offensive capabilities including mortars and machinegun bunkers. This aspect of the game is surprisingly complicated and in-depth, meaning it's best left to a squad leader who knows what they are doing.

The learning curve for *Squad* is, in general, pretty steep. As well as almost every key on your keyboard being used for something and vehicles requiring some practice to operate competently, there are

lots of unwritten social rules to adhere to. If you dive in without

Squad players are, for the most part, quite welcoming

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A squad-based multiplayer shooter.

FIRST RELEASED
December 15, 2015

VERSION TESTED
Alpha 12.2

EXPECT TO PAY
£30

DEVELOPER
Offworld Industries

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
www.joinssquad.com

doing any research you'll probably find the game pretty unsatisfying.

While *Squad* players are, for the most part, quite welcoming, they will get frustrated if you keep screwing up. Not using a microphone is a pretty big crime here, but there's less obvious stuff to consider, too, like not immediately hitting 'give up' when you're incapacitated, rather than calling for a medic. Oh, and *Squad* has friendly fire, which means knowing who you're shooting at before squeezing the trigger is vital.

Maps include Fool's Road, an expanse of woodland in Eastern Europe with scattered buildings and forested valleys. Al Basrah is a city in the Republic of Iraq next to a river, with roads snaking out towards a nearby village. And Belaya, also located in Eastern Europe, features snowstorms, frozen terrain and a network of tunnels that play host to brutal close-quarters firefights. These, and all the game's maps, are understated and realistic, rather than designed around gimmicks.

MILITARY MIGHT

Since being released via Steam Early Access in 2015, *Squad* has grown from something pretty barebones to a fully-featured military shooter with vehicles and rich squad management tools, as well as several large maps and multiple playable factions. The interface is highly customisable, too. But whether or not *Squad* is the right game for you depends on how willing you are to get into the spirit of getting involved and being a team player.

It's easy to play *Battlefield* solo and have fun, but here you'll have to befriend strangers to get the most out of the experience. Luckily there are lots of community guides on places such as the *Squad* subreddit, the joinssquad.com forums and squad.gamepedia.com to teach you the basics and impart the wisdom of veteran players. I recommend reading these before you join one of those 80-player online servers, 'cause it's tough out there for a greenhorn. ■

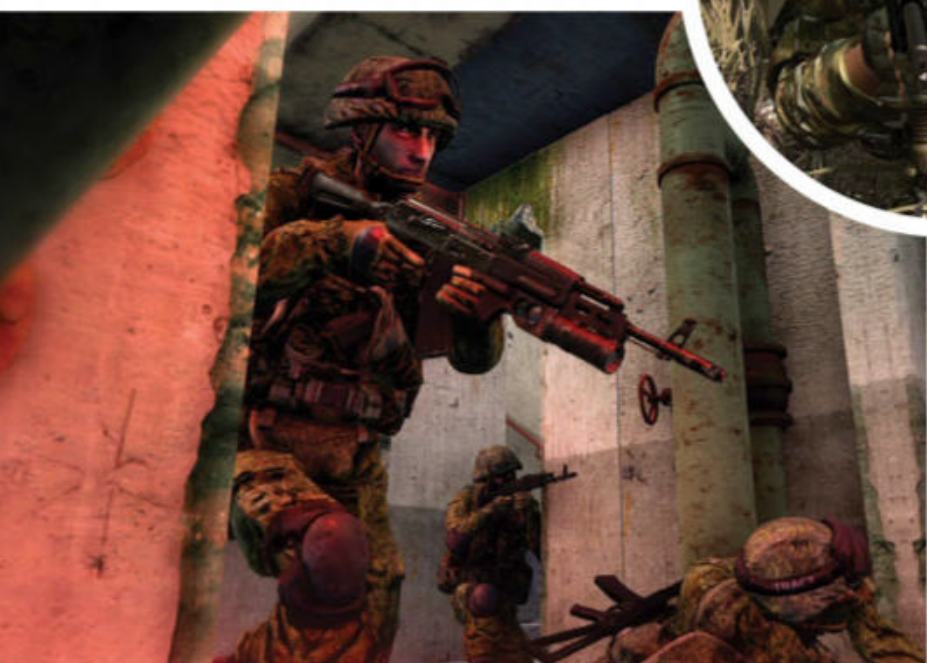
BAD FORM

Seven deadly Squad sins

- 1 Not using a mic or having one and remaining silent.
- 2 Taking a vehicle, driving it by yourself, then ditching it.
- 3 Shooting friendlies, even if it's an accident.
- 4 Not practicing shooting on the firing range.
- 5 Joining a squad to get a gun, then immediately leaving.
- 6 Running around in the open like you're playing *CoD*.
- 7 Not talking about the mission in chat.



Don't invite that friend who says 'Oscar Mike' unironically.



One tank, ready for war.

Getting started can be intimidating.





Combat already feels good.



Hell looks pretty nice, all things considered.

“He’s angry at you, in part because you’ve left your bedroom in a mess”

Having a hell of a time in **HADES**. By Tom Senior

Hell is a roguelike, it turns out. Repeatedly clearing rooms, dying, and trying again ought to be a suitable form of punishment in the afterlife, but Lord Hades accidentally made it too much fun. Every arena in *Hades*’ randomly generated dungeon is full of enemies to smash. Forget the meditative pace of Supergiant’s previous games like *Bastion* and *Transistor*, this is a beautifully drawn third-person action game about dodging attacks and battering ghosts.

Every time you die (which happens a lot) you march out of a pool of blood and have a catty exchange with Lord Hades himself, who happens to be your dad. He’s angry at you, in part because you’ve left your bedroom in a mess, but mainly because you want to leave his kingdom forever. New rooms open up here as you fight deeper and deeper into the dungeon, and there are NPCs to befriend, including the enormous red hellhound Cerberus and the spirit of Achilles.

You can use the hub to improve yourself between runs. A magic mirror in your bedroom lets you spend upgrade points to increase backstab damage, and there’s a training room where you can unlock new weapons. These two rooms are

the source of most of your progression, but you can also give dungeon gifts to your pals in return for character buffs. I have a collar from Cerberus that gives me bonus health because he’s a very good boy, yes he is.

You can give dungeon gifts to your pals in return for character buffs

The gods of Olympus even lend a hand, sometimes. They appear as glowing balls of energy in the dungeon. After a brief chat you take on their powers, which

modifies your moveset. Zeus charges your attacks with lightning, while Athena gives your attacks the chance to deflect incoming damage. These pair with *Hades*’ weapons in interesting ways. A Zeus buff on the bow helps you deal a lot of extra single-target damage. A Zeus buff on the shield throw, however, causes it to spew out

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A hellish roguelike.

FIRST RELEASED
December 6, 2018

VERSION TESTED
Patch 006

EXPECT TO PAY
£15.49

DEVELOPER
Supergiant Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
www.supergiantgames.com



electric orbs, making it good against hordes of enemies.

HELL’S BELLS

I hope that Early Access development will eventually deliver more weapons, but the opening four are already varied. Fighting with the bow means you have to play evasively and wait for the right moment to draw. If you release the shot at just the right moment you get a satisfying damage spike. It almost feels like a rhythm action game. The sword is the most basic of the set, but it’s a good starting point until you unlock my favourite: Zeus’ shield. You can lob it and watch it pinball between enemies, or you can hold down left-mouse to queue up a charge that smashes through enemies. Once you’re on the other side of them you can turn around and get some hits in for that sweet backstab damage.

Hades is already a thrilling arena combat game with beautiful art, and it’s easy to see how Supergiant can build the game out during Early Access with new weapons, enemies, rooms, and bosses. Not many developers can claim that they’re using Early Access to literally add extra layers to hell. I can’t wait to see how it turns out. ■

“I find it tense because my choices are so brutally limited”

Take care of your dog in **OVERLAND**. By Wes Fenlon

For hours after playing *Overland*, I felt guilty about leaving my dog behind. Rita didn't deserve to be abandoned. She'd helped me find a vital fuel can the day before, giving my car enough juice to finally leave the east coast behind. When I abandoned her she was waiting patiently behind the car, and there was no real reason for me to rush. But *Overland*'s quiet post-apocalypse puts me on edge, and that constant simmering tension made me leave the area before I needed to. There's no going back.

More than two years into its Itch.io First Access release, *Overland* is a simple game. You're headed west through procedurally generated slices of Americana, each a small turn-based mission with scarce resources and weapons to scavenge. You start with one survivor and can recruit others. Each can only hold an item or two at a time, like a stick for bashing or a flare for lighting up pitch-black night missions.

Burrowing, crystalline creatures prowl each area and can easily kill

your survivors in an attack or two. Fighting them is usually a bad idea. Kill one, and they start spawning all around you. It's usually better to outmanoeuvre them.

Ramming an enemy with my car a couple times will ruin it

Overland makes me think of strategy games like *Into the Breach*, but it's far simpler. I find it tense because my choices are so brutally limited. Without proper planning, the time it takes to push a barricade out of the way so my car can exit the stage can mean death. Ramming an enemy with my car a couple of times will ruin it, and it'll

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An isometric survival game (with dogs).

FIRST RELEASED
April 19, 2016

VERSION TESTED
Build 349

EXPECT TO PAY
£16

DEVELOPER
Finji

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
www.finji.co

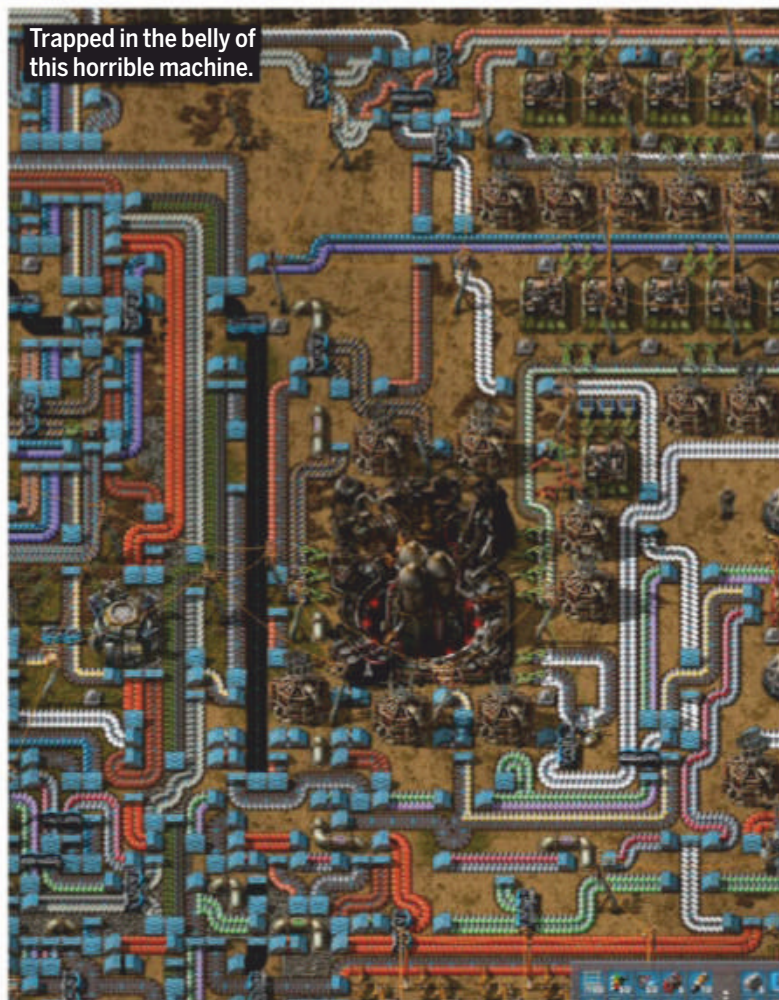
explode before I can walk to safety. Even without survival systems like hunger, thirst or freezing to death because your left shoe has fallen apart and you stepped in a puddle, making it out alive isn't easy.

ROCKY ROAD

After just a few runs, though, the strategy of *Overland* feels too shallow to keep me playing. I do like that it forces me to make hard choices: do I pick up the medpack or the gas can? Kill the enemy or try to draw it away? But ultimately I have more fun with strategy games that give me more options.

What does keep me starting new runs, though, is tone. *Overland* is unusually quiet and so beautiful, and the art and brief dialogue scenes give the survivors a promising touch of personality. Right now their dialogue is too simple and repetitive, but with stronger identities, I'd latch onto characters and be determined to keep them alive the entire road west. ■





“Conveyor belts run through like blood vessels”

Be an industry titan in **FACTORIO**. By Phil Savage

Rows of assembly machines stretch further than the eye can see. Conveyor belts run through like blood vessels, carrying their cargo to the heart of this self-sustaining machine. Fields of accumulators crackle through the night, storing the energy from a sea of solar panels. Trains work tirelessly ferrying who-knows-what to who-knows-where.

I did not build this place. My forays into *Factorio*'s mix of construction, resource gathering and automation have been basic. The opening moments will feel familiar if you've played any building or survival game. You craft a pickaxe and gather iron ore, copper ore, stone and wood. You build a furnace and refine those base resources into building materials to craft more complicated things.

Those things are expensive. You'll need plenty of iron sheets and copper wires, which means ore and coal. Perhaps you should build a drill to automate parts of the process? And maybe you could set up a conveyor belt to transport ore to the furnace? But to do that you'll need power, which means yet more materials. And so you fall deeper and deeper down this industrial tech tree, until before you know it you're surrounded by endlessly churning machines.

Factorio gets complicated, and the route from my early steps to the endgame save file I downloaded from someone who's spent hundreds of hours perfecting their design feels intimidating. But once you've set up the beginnings of automation, the loop of planning, creation and tinkering is relaxing. Even unfinished, *Factorio* feels generous. ■

NEED TO KNOW

FIRST RELEASED
February 25, 2016

VERSION TESTED
0.16.51

EXPECT TO PAY
£21



“I’ve passed the point where I need to be an active participant”

Making my own fun in **BEAMNG.DRIVE**. By Phil Savage

I'm driving a bus down a mountain road. Flashes of black void flit across the screen arrhythmically. I'm pretty sure they're not supposed to be there. About halfway down, I'm told there's a bomb wired to the bus that will detonate if I drop below 34mph. Unfortunately I also have to follow checkpoints around some tricky corners. I clip a barrier and never recover my speed. Boom!

I'm driving through a... er... forest? There are trees that look like big house plants. I'm on a flat piece of AstroTurf overlooking a bowl. I drive over the ramp at the end and aim for the centre of the target on the floor below. I miss and get a bronze medal. Welcome to car darts.

I'm driving into a black hole. Or more accurately I was driving into a

black hole. I've passed the point where I need to be an active participant. My car is slowly dragged towards the black mass until it flies, bursting through the imposing mass with such force that it leaves the map, flying forever in an eerie grey void.

BeamNG.Drive reminds me a lot of *Garry's Mod*. There's no rhyme nor reason, just an ever-expanding collection of scenarios thanks to its community of creators. There is no objective. Are you having fun with a slightly shonky sandbox full of carnage and strange, uncanny physics? Then congratulations, you have won *BeamNG.Drive*.

It's ideal for Early Access because the fundamentals are in place, and content arrives from the community. If you're prepared to put in the work to entertain yourself, *BeamNG.Drive* is rich, weird and rewarding. ■



NEED TO KNOW

FIRST RELEASED
May 29, 2015

VERSION TESTED
0.15

EXPECT TO PAY
£19



Sorry, friend, the oxygen is...
looks to camera not included.

“When the Dupes begin to break down so does everything else”

OXYGEN NOT INCLUDED hides a challenging chemistry class. *By Chris Livingston*

The best sim games don't just make it satisfying to succeed but also make it fun to fail, and *Oxygen Not Included*, from *Don't Starve* developer Klei Entertainment, does both extremely well. Deep within an asteroid hurtling through space, you activate a 3D printer and give birth to a handful of living **Duplicants**: cloned workers you'll use to carve the interior of the space rock into a functioning colony. Your Dupes will dig tunnels, carve out chambers, build structures and assemble machines to extract clean water, oxygen and other resources from the asteroid.

Soon your colony will be humming along, but it won't take long before you start wishing your Dupes were soulless robots instead of human clones. There's no bigger wrench you can throw into a smoothly running machine than a human being, even a cloned one.

See, your Dupes are individuals with needs: not only do they require sleep, food and clean air, but they also need a degree of comfort and happiness or they'll begin to get stressed out. Something as simple as a water leak in a corridor making their socks soggy can begin to put a strain on their moods. A Duplicant in a bad mood won't work as efficiently, and when the Dupes begin to break down, so does everything else. It's all

adorable to witness – Klei's typically wonderful art and animations can clue you into a Dupe's mood with a simple glance – but these cute little tantrums can be the downfall of your colony. More than once I've had a Dupe not only refuse to work but actually begin running around smashing things in a rage. Things like the machinery keeping everyone alive.

As you learn to manage your Dupes and keep them happy enough to not actively

sabotage your colony, you'll also learn more about the complexity lying beneath the charming surface of the sim. This isn't just a matter of setting up an oxygen diffuser and filling a chamber with air. Other gases are

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A deceptive space colony sim.

FIRST RELEASED
May 18, 2017

VERSION TESTED
QLM1

EXPECT TO PAY
£19

DEVELOPER
Klei Entertainment

PUBLISHER
In-house

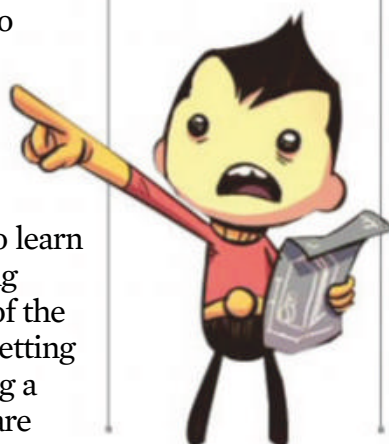
LINK
www.klei.com

present in the rock: carbon dioxide, chlorine, natural gas, helium, phosphorus and others, each with their own properties and density, which determine how they spread through an area. There's a pretty wicked learning curve in *Oxygen Not Included* – it can quickly start to feel like a chemistry class and plumbing apprenticeship rolled into one – but the failure of your colony always arms you with some new knowledge that helps make your next attempt that much stronger.

DEEP IMPACT

You can even take your colony all the way up to the surface of the asteroid, where you'll meet new challenges like meteor showers (which, on the plus side, can provide you with resources even as it destroys your hard work and kills some of your Dupes). The wonderful thing about *Oxygen Not Included* is that it's remarkably easy to grasp the basics of colony management, so getting into the game is a snap. But it's wonderfully complex as well, with lots of depth to its many systems. And, as with any great management game, whether your colony thrives and succeeds or crashes and burns, it's a pleasure to watch unfold. ■

It's remarkably easy to grasp the basics of colony management



Spoilers for anyone wondering if there were dirt paths.

Vedina Clauclella
ST: 20 AG: 19 QN: 100
TO: 21 WI: 25 MS: 100
IN: 27 EG: 22 T: 32
AV: 3 DV: 5 MA: 8
XP: 250000 / 263740
Tumescient, Bloated
HP: 129 / 129 #152/300

4th of Kisu Ux
Waning Salt Sun
flamethrower

destroyed!
> You pass by a dirt path.
> You pass by a dirt path.
*path.
/> You pass by a dirt path.
> You pass by a dirt path.

“I don’t need a degree to understand what’s happening on-screen”

Keep away from the ooze in **CAVES OF QUD**. By Steven Messner

My name is Hashur, and I am a mutant. I have four arms, two wings and the surprisingly useful ability to expel a cloud of corrosive gas out of my pores. I also have a very slim chance that, at any moment, I might spontaneously combust. Right now, I’m bartering with a sentient beanstalk named Yurl. It’s not going very well because I have very little water, the de facto currency of those who live among the jungles of Qud.

I’m out of water because I spent it all buying a book from the mayor of this little hamlet, who also happens to be a towering albino ape named Nuntu. I needed that book because it’s the only way I can find the procedurally generated cure to Glotrot, a disease that will slowly rot out my tongue and make it impossible to speak.

This is just my most recent playthrough of *Caves of Qud*, a daunting but brilliant roguelike that focuses as much – if not more – on story and worldbuilding than game systems. Sadly, I don’t imagine I’ll survive much longer. If the Glotrot doesn’t get me, the hordes of goatmen who prowl the jungles outside of this village definitely will. And then, like so many times before, I’ll have to start an entirely brand-new character. Hopefully this next one won’t slip in

a puddle of black ooze and contract a horrible, disfiguring illness. I guess this is what I get for venturing unprepared into the chrome ruins that dot Qud’s toxic jungles.

I’m not too saddened over my inevitable death, however. With over 70 mutations to choose from – everything from telepathy to night vision to photosynthetic skin – making a new character in *Caves of Qud* is just as fun as

Making a new character in *Caves of Qud* is just as fun as playing one

playing one. And don’t be fooled by the ASCII-style graphics either, this is one of the most robust and imaginative worlds I’ve explored.

That’s largely thanks to how *Caves of Qud* uses procedural generation. Though the general overworld stays the same, entire fortresses, ruins and cave systems are randomly generated on each playthrough. Even more

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A ‘science fantasy’ roguelike.

FIRST RELEASED

July 15, 2015

VERSION TESTED

2.0.160.5 Beta

EXPECT TO PAY

£7

DEVELOPER

Freehold Games

PUBLISHER

In-house

LINK

www.cavesofqud.com

interesting, *Caves of Qud* also procedurally creates entire histories and cultures to unearth. That makes each playthrough so entirely different that I never know what to expect when I step into a cave. It’s like *Dwarf Fortress* only I don’t need a degree to understand what’s happening on-screen or how to play.

WEIRD WORLD

In the dozen or so hours I’ve played, I’ve made friends with tinkers that also happen to be sentient bears, spelunked through ancient techno-ruins filled with lonely robots and once met a legendary cobbler while being chased by stone-throwing baboons. I’ve also died. A lot. But *Caves of Qud* uses each death as an opportunity to offer a new perspective into its bizarre, colourful post-apocalyptic world where man-camels trade vibroblades for water and beneath the procedurally generated surface lies an infinite network of caves to explore. It’s an alien world that comes alive thanks to expressive bits of flavour text that accompany every item and object. It might still be an Early Access game, but *Caves of Qud* already harbours more secrets than I could hope to find in a hundred hours. ■

“I really don’t know how to feel about sending a 12-year-old to mine ore”

KYNSEED wants to be the life sim you’ll take to the grave. *By Malindy Hetfeld*

You start life in *Kynseed*’s world of Quill as a 12 year-old, immediately buried under a mountain of chores. For the first few hours this means mostly running errands and figuring out how exactly things work. You feed the family pig, harvest vegetables and go out to buy tools. When it comes to completing tasks, *Kynseed* is, by turns, detail-oriented and delightfully unconcerned.

You can milk a cow by simply standing next to it, but you need a bucket. You harvest crops instantly by clicking, but if you just leave them they’ll rot. Granted, virtually nothing ever takes itself too seriously, as you would expect of a game designed by two Lionhead alumni who count *Fable* among their proudest achievements. *Kynseed* is already creaking with pun-laden flavour text and kooky characters, although none of them say much yet.

Quill is a lovely place, right down to its mossy logs, mysterious runes

and the odd stray cat. It’s there to be explored in your own time, with nothing but simple maps and road signs to guide you. You have all the time in the world to look around—falling asleep where you stand won’t incur any large penalties.

You can pass on your legacy to your children and continue from there

CIRCLE OF LIFE

As you explore, you regularly come across signs telling you about upcoming content. Boy, there is a lot of it, from

the ability to befriend and marry any villager, each with individual likes and dislikes, to monster-slaying and owning a shop. There’s much to look

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A beautiful sandbox life-sim

FIRST RELEASED

November 8, 2018

VERSION TESTED

The First Steps Update

EXPECT TO PAY

£7.49

DEVELOPER

PixelCount Studios

PUBLISHER

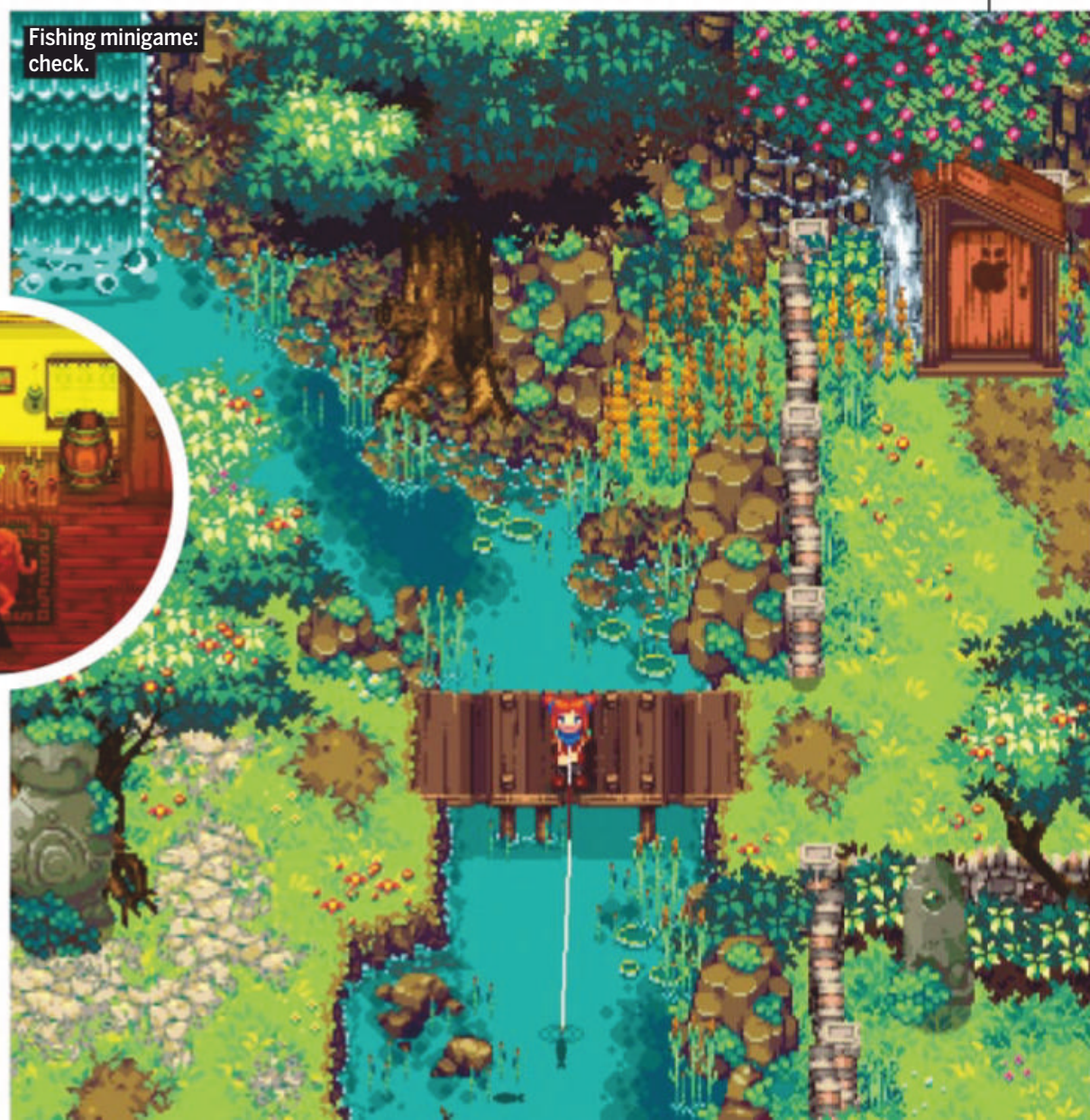
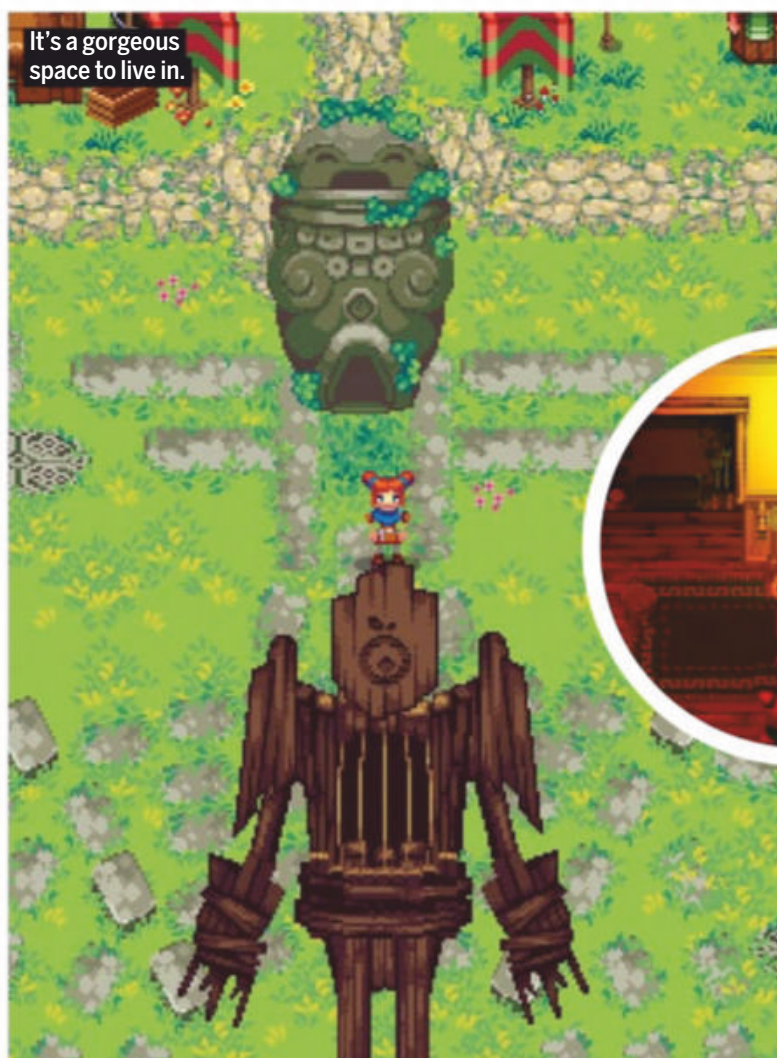
In-house

LINK

www.pixelcountstudios.com

forward to. Most importantly, the system behind the title-giving *Kynseed* hasn’t been implemented yet. The *Kynseed* is the foundation of your family tree, steeped with magic, the evidence of which you can see everywhere. It will make sure that villagers remember your deeds forever. Everyone grows old and dies, but in the finished game you can then pass on your legacy to your children and continue from there.

Kynseed is ambitious, but right now mostly comes down to child labour and busywork (I really don’t know how to feel about sending a 12-year-old to mine ore without a lamp.) Soon, your daily tasks mostly consist of hauling buckets of milk for miles to everyone in the village. With all its interlocking systems, minigames and menus, it will likely resemble *Graveyard Keeper* more closely than *Stardew Valley* once it is done, but like any life-spawning adventure, it still needs lots of attention to grow strong. ■



BEIGE

is the new

BLACK

Rebuilding a 1998 rig just to
play *Half-Life*.

By Phil Iwaniuk



It all started with *Black Mesa*. Firstly, because the stars aligned in Christmas 1998 such that my first taste of PC gaming happened to be *Half-Life*, the best shooter ever made. Santa Claus delivered a personal computer to our home that year – a Packard Bell Platinum 350, since you ask. A 350MHz Pentium II lay within it. A 3DFX Voodoo 2 with 8MB onboard memory. 16MB of RAM and 6GB of hard drive space. These were formidable gaming specs, and when I was given the luxury of choosing a new PC game to accompany it under the tree I relied on the wisdom of PC Gamer, who sure were keen on this *Half-Life* game. That Christmas was magical. But that's not the point.

I mean to say, it all started with *Black Mesa*, the Source Engine reworking of *Half-Life* by Crowbar Collective. When it appeared on my radar back in 2013 I thought it looked like the perfect way to experience the game I'd confidently been calling the best shooter ever made – having played it just once, aged 12 – once again. After 15 years of abstinence I'd once more allow myself to take in the giddy delights of creeping past the tentacle beast and watching Barney's plunge to their doom in broken elevators through the lens of this Source Engine remake.

I lasted about two minutes. That was all the time it took to realise that every slight deviation, every instance of minor creative licensing, was only going to wind me up. The Barney's all had different lines! The posters were slightly different! Some of the rooms were bigger/smaller than I remembered! This wouldn't do.

No, this wouldn't do at all. I made a very serious promise to myself that day, having closed down the perfectly good *Black Mesa* mod. The only way I'd play my darling *Half-Life* ever again was in situ: the original game disc I'd kept all these years, running on a Packard Bell Platinum 350. So began a painstaking and indefensibly self-indulgent quest to source nearly worthless PC parts.

The keyboard and mouse were surprisingly easy to get hold of. Having set up eBay alerts for every bit of Packard Bell minutiae I required, I was directed to the very same 'board, complete with redundant multimedia controls, going for a princely £10. It arrived shortly afterward, smelling faintly of *someone else's house* and, well, presumably working. I didn't have anything to

RIGHT: The off-white box that powered an all-time classic.

FAR RIGHT: I'm still searching for the screen. Can you help?





plug its PS/2 connector into to check. I opted for a Microsoft Intellimouse to pair it with because – and I’m ashamed to write this – I can’t remember much about the original mouse that came with my first PC and I’m pretty certain we plumped for the Intellimouse quite quickly anyway. They’re ten-a-penny on eBay too. Easy, this retro PC-sourcing lark.

RETRO FIT

The real difficulty began, funnily enough, when it came to finding a specific model of PC released 20 years ago in good working order. Retro gaming PCs are all the rage at the moment, and there’s a growing cottage industry of PC builders who source old parts and practise the dark art of ‘refurbishment’ on them (in reality a can of compressed air and some homemade bleach solution to remove the yellowing on beige plastic). But what if you’re not just looking for a retro gaming PC, but *the* retro gaming PC? After a year of eBay alerts and fortnightly searches, I hadn’t come close. I was at such a low ebb that I considered hitting the ‘Buy it Now’ button on a Dell.

I also thought about building the machine by sourcing the individual parts, and I must now say in the strongest terms possible: don’t do this. You’ve forgotten everything about hardware standards and

IN WITH THE OLD

My shopping list



Packard Bell tower PC (Pii 350, 16MB RAM, Voodoo 2) £100

Original keyboard £10

Microsoft Intellimouse £10

Windows 98 £12.99

6GB IDE hard drive £10

TOTAL £142.99

compatibility from 20 years ago. You have no idea what chipset that motherboard you’re looking at is, and there isn’t a damn thing on the internet about it to inform you. No one will help you if that Voodoo 3 doesn’t fit, and good luck getting all the right cables to connect your miraculously compatible components which you’ve implausibly found working drivers for. Honestly, forget it. Buy a prebuilt PC which the seller confirms is in full working order. If

they include the original recovery disc, that’s a massive bonus. You’ll need to buy your old operating system of choice otherwise, and although Windows 98 isn’t quite as expensive now (£15-£20 from most sellers), it’s an added cost you might initially overlook. If you want, you can even refurbish an old machine yourself by buying a £5 can of air and following one of the many questionable recipes for ‘Retrobright’ solution to bleach parts back to factory fresh – just know that PC Gamer accepts no responsibility for you ruining your floors, bathtub, hands and PC parts.

It came as quite a surprise when my exact make and model of PC materialised on eBay after a full year without leads. I stared at each shaky smartphone photograph on the listing with an almost pornographic fascination, barely conceiving the needle I’d found in eBay’s discarded goods haystack. The seller had listed it with a guide price of £400 to encourage private offers, and honestly I’d have paid it if it came to it. In the end, though, I sent an offer of £100 and spent the day worrying that I’d lowballed to such an insulting degree that my bridge with this seller was forever burned. He accepted it instantly, because you would, wouldn’t you, if some weirdo came out of the woodwork desperate for your unwanted two-decades-old computer. Thanks again, sync_it, and sorry about deleting all your old *Champ Man 3* saves.

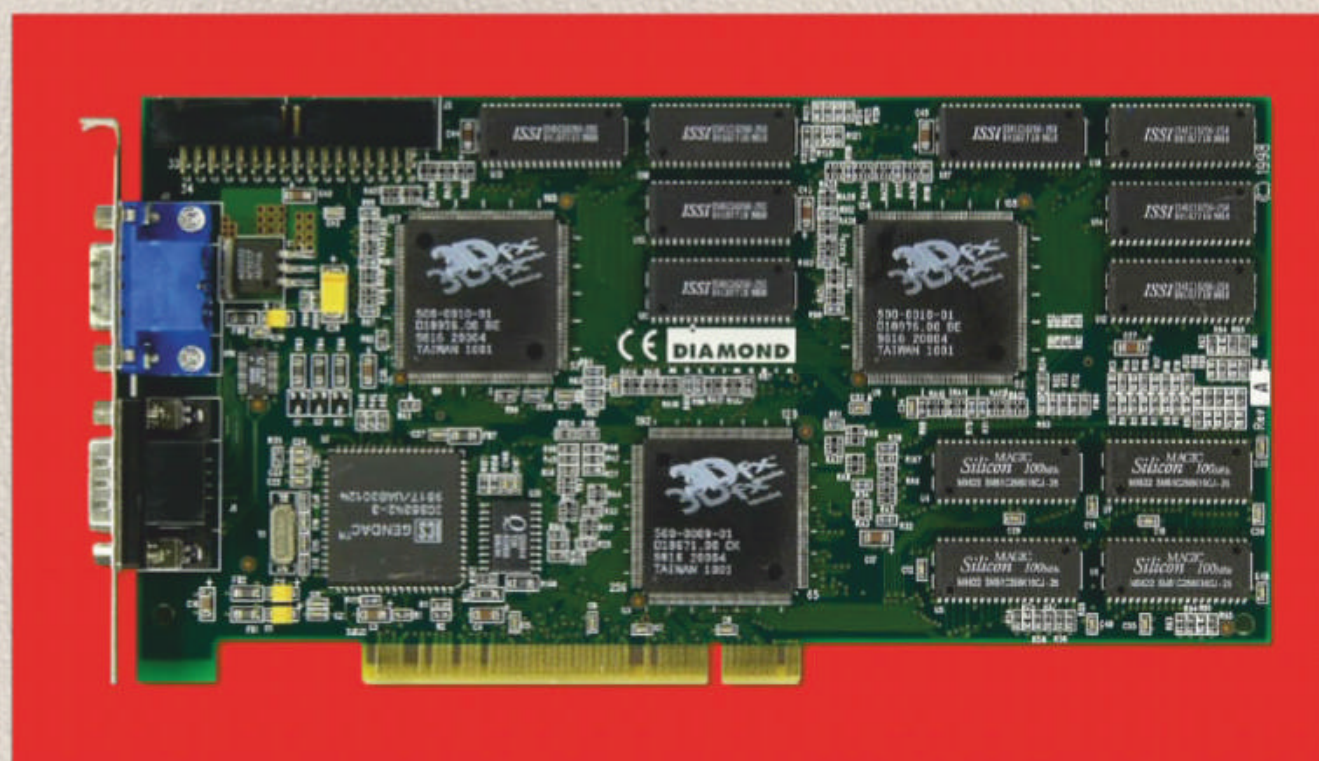
The fates had smiled on me. I’d secured some very specific pieces, and I hadn’t even had to risk the one website that claimed to still be selling my original PC new, 20 years later. Still, two pieces still elude me: the Packard Bell Milano 17-inch CRT monitor, and the recovery disc. I’ll keep searching, of course, but I was especially disappointed not to fully immerse myself into 1998-o-vision

TOP: *Half-Life* is just as good as you remember. Confirmed.

with a CRT's characteristic display. Good CRTs are hard to find now – most have either been chucked, broken, or taken to recycling centres to fester away. Of those that appear on eBay, most predate my target Windows 98 era – there's high demand for Win95 screens and earlier, it seems. They're also heavy as all heck, which means delivery is a real issue – there are specialist couriers who deal with fragile items and know how to handle a CRT, however. Perhaps there's someone out there who's cared for a Milano monitor all these years, someone now ready to part with it. Until I find them, I must subject my retro rig to the indignity of outputting on a 32-inch IPS.

Never mind. The beating heart of the PC was just as it had been. Likewise my peripherals. What a perfect way to remind oneself what PC gaming was really, truly like 20 years ago. That's no small point – that era's been fetishised in recent years, evidenced by Kickstarter-funded odes to the Infinity Engine RPGs, and reboots of everything from *Thief* to *Outcast*. Not to mention *Black Mesa*, of course. What's clear when you press the power button on an old tower PC, hear the Windows 98 welcome chimes, and load a game's CD-ROM into the tray, is that we've forgotten much of the era's reality.

For example: first-person shooter control schemes were the wild west in 1998. By default, *Half-Life*'s controls are bound to the arrow keys, of which left and right *turn*, rather



than strafe. At least mouselook is enabled by default. *Quake II*, released just a year prior, maps the mouse to moving forwards, while A and Z control your vertical view. Barbaric.

FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER CONTROL SCHEMES WERE THE WILD WEST IN 1998

REVISIONIST HISTORY

On the technical side, we've forgotten much about what games looked like when they released – for most people,

running on a software renderer in 640x480 and still not hitting anything like 60fps. The *Half-Life* you see in YouTube speedruns and let's plays, running at modern day resolutions, bears little resemblance to the one I lost myself in the Christmas it came out. That game is grainier, darker, and somehow more



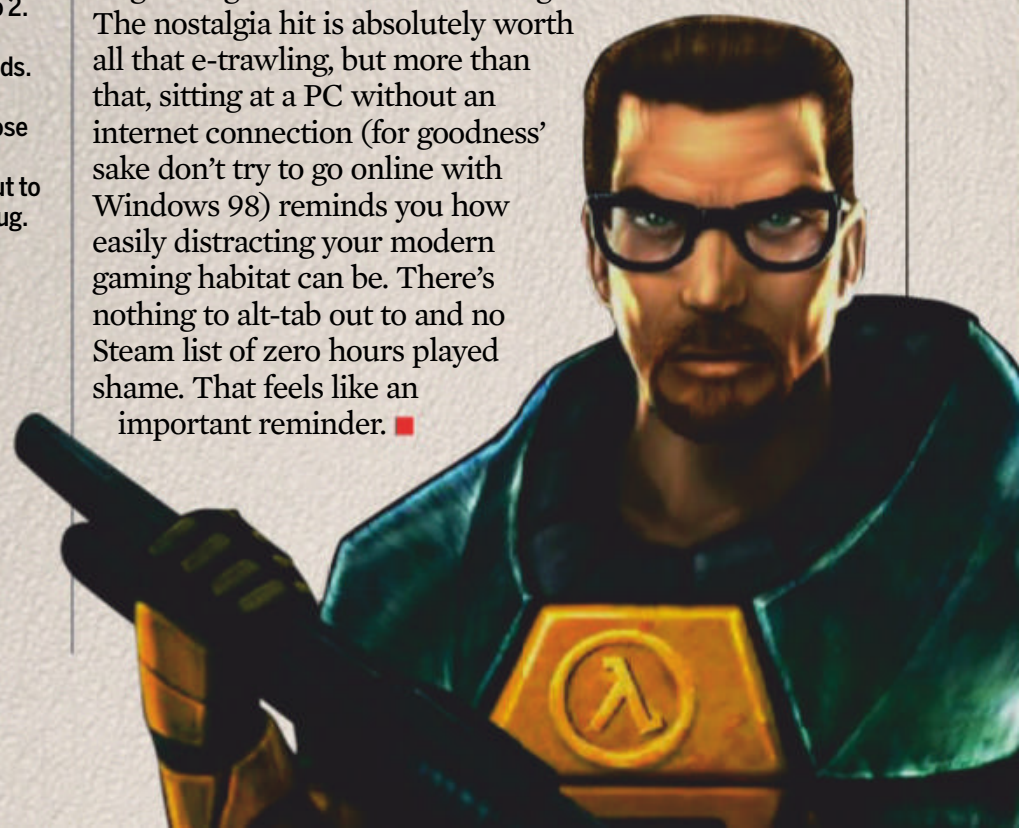
atmospheric for it. Although hundreds of shooters have since aped *Half-Life*'s setpieces, NPCs and storytelling techniques, Valve's vision stands as tall and impressive on this retro PC as it did on release. *Half-Life* was, and is, a place you go, rather than a game you play.

Perhaps the most profound realisation that comes from building an old PC and booting up a treasured memory is that I'd advocate every single PC gamer do the same thing. The nostalgia hit is absolutely worth all that e-trawling, but more than that, sitting at a PC without an internet connection (for goodness' sake don't try to go online with Windows 98) reminds you how easily distracting your modern gaming habitat can be. There's nothing to alt-tab out to and no Steam list of zero hours played shame. That feels like an important reminder. ■



TOP: The Voodoo 2. Rolls-Royce of pre-'00s AGP cards.

LEFT: Look at those subtle, sweeping lines, reaching out to your palm for a hug.



INTERVIEW



Charlie Brooker

The creator of dystopian anthology series Black Mirror on **BANDERSNATCH**, an interactive episode inspired by games and gaming culture. *By Andy Kelly*

Interactive storytelling is nothing new, but something as mainstream as Netflix embracing the concept is a big deal. *Bandersnatch*, the newest episode of Black Mirror, lets you make choices that determine the path the story takes. And you can access it using just Netflix and a TV remote. I talked with writer Charlie Brooker about the episode, how it was made and what inspired it.

PROFILE

Brooker has been a journalist, satirist, presenter and, more recently, a TV writer. In 2011 he created Black Mirror, an anthology series with a dark edge, which was recently purchased by Netflix.

How did you pitch the idea of an interactive Black Mirror story to Netflix?

They actually asked us. We had a meeting at their headquarters in Los Angeles – which, by the way, has M&M dispensers on every floor. That's my overriding memory. Todd Yellin and Carla Engelbrecht from the tech division showed us some of their interactive capabilities, which were quite rudimentary at the time. Then they asked us if we'd be interested in coming up with a Black Mirror story using this technology.

And we said no! Well, we said yes, that's interesting, we'll go and think about it. Then, later, we came up with a story outline that could work. I wanted to do a retro episode that was actually set in the past. We'd done San Junipero before, which was set in 1987, but it was really the future. I also knew that I wanted to do a story about old, old computer games.

And from there we had the idea about a character in the past and someone in the future controlling him, trying to make sure he writes this particular computer game because it's important in the future. A bit like the plot of The Terminator, basically. And then I thought, 'What if the person giving this character instructions is you, the viewer? Hang on a minute, that sounds like it could be an interactive thing. Oh shit, that's a good idea!' And so we went back to Netflix and said, 'Okay, we can do one now.'

Why were you initially reluctant to make an interactive episode of television?

The first FMV games I can remember playing were *Dragon's Lair*, *Mad Dog McCree*, *Space Ace* and some of those LaserDisc arcade games like *Firefox*. I was writing for PC Zone in the '90s and there were a lot of them released on PC, too. Stuff like *Under A Killing Moon* and *Night Trap*, which caused a huge deal of controversy at the time and made the tabloids shit their pants. But the problem with these kinds of CD-ROM games was that they weren't as satisfying to play as something like *Sam & Max*.

There's a lot of waiting around and you're constantly taken out of the story by cuts to black while it loads in the next bit of video. Even flicking between scenes on a DVD >>



RIGHT: Stefan is played by Fionn Whitehead, who you may remember as Tommy in Dunkirk.

there's a little gap. So I was a bit worried about *Bandersnatch* being like that. Even in more up-to-date games like *Heavy Rain* and *Until Dawn*, which are in similar territory, there are breaks for loading. So my big concern was making it work seamlessly. We had a lot of technical restrictions at first, like clips and choice points needing to be a certain length. But they refined it over time until it was less restrictive.

How does *Bandersnatch* actually work on a technical level, did you go through any iterations of the design?

When the black widescreen bars lift up subtly and your choices appear, that all happens via the UI. And while that's happening it's caching in the next two bits of video in the background, ready to play when you make a choice. So if you're watching it on a games console or a fairly up-to-date TV, and your internet connection is good, you'll get no gap at all.

We put a lot of thought into designing the interface. At first I wanted the choices to just be images, because Netflix is a global platform and we wanted it to be universal. But their tech became sophisticated enough that we could choose the font and have the choices in different languages.

We wanted it to feel like a kind of graceful magic trick. I was skeptical at first and didn't think it would be possible. We had a basic playable version of it for the edit, and there were gaps in it. But when I first saw it playing in full, actually on the Netflix platform, it was quite emotional.

How else did you experiment with the format of interactive storytelling?

When you watch the episode on a games console the controller rumbles at each choice point. Netflix showed us an early demo version and the vibration was way too high, so I said, as a reference, go away and play *Forza Horizon 4* and when you drive over some leaves, that's the level of intensity we want. That was some pretty weird feedback to give.



The strength of the vibration actually increases when it's a big decision, so we did experiment a little with it. I do have an idea about how we could translate it to the Oculus Rift, by the way. But in case we do it, I'm not gonna say what it is. It would be relatively easy and we'd have one big surprise in it. But I definitely think we could do a VR version.

A branching story like this must be pretty difficult to structure. How did you map the narrative out?

Annabel Jones (Black Mirror's executive producer) and I got a whiteboard and a marker and started making a flowchart, but then we were like, 'Wait, we're going to need a lot more whiteboards here.' So we looked into using flowchart software. But I wanted something more complex than a flowchart, which led me to tools like Inklewriter, which was user friendly, but fairly unreliable and would crash a lot. The tool I wanted didn't seem to exist, but people kept saying that I should use Twine.



TOP: Stefan meets with his psychiatrist, Dr. Haynes, and you choose what to say to her.

LEFT: The '80s setting is lovingly realised, down to that retro Wimpy logo.

I took a look at Twine and I thought, 'Fuck me, that looks complicated!' I did a bit of HTML in the late '90s, so it was kind of familiar, but I still didn't want to learn it. I'm 47 years old! I don't have room in my head! But eventually I got to grips with it, getting it to remember choices and so on.

I kept going back to Netflix with stuff I'd put together in Twine and saying, 'Is this possible?' They would never say no, but they would give it a shot, and nine times out of ten they'd pull it off. So, actually, a lot of my original coding, which I'm sure is very messy and amateurish and shit, sort of ended up being translated directly across to their new interactive platform.

I like how in some endings, despite sacrificing so much of himself to make it, Stefan's game gets a bad or mediocre review.

I was thinking about game reviews in general, especially from the era the story is set. I was born in 1971 and I used to read Crash magazine in my early teenage years. I also used to watch Micro Live on the BBC in the '80s, which would hold videogames at arm's length. They were like, 'Oh, these silly games,' but that's probably what 90% of the audience was tuning in for!

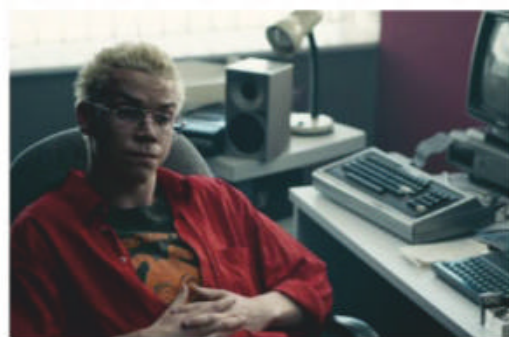
I remember when they'd have someone in a bowtie reviewing text adventures like *The Hobbit* and other games, which translated directly into Micro Play, our homage to the show in *Bandersnatch*. We had Paul Bradley playing this reviewer called Robin, who we deliberately made look like an unusually young person in a bowtie, which just amused me.

Some game developers have been quite negative about *Bandersnatch*. Did you expect that kind of reaction from the industry?

Some games people were saying that this is nothing new, that games have done it better, but they're not running on Netflix! This isn't a gaming platform, so we had to build all this stuff from the ground up and learn it as we went. But any response is a valid one. I'm the last person who can moan about anyone reviewing it harshly either as a show or a game, because I've dished out enough negative reviews of both in my time!

But steeped within the episode is a lot of stuff about the nascent British games industry of the early '80s, and a lot of thought went into the detail of that. So I hoped that would convince anyone thinking we know nothing about games that we do. If we'd done *Bandersnatch* as a PC game or a PlayStation game it would've been a very different thing.

I slightly roll my eyes when people say the episode is a new form of storytelling, because it really isn't. It's basically the same as *Dragon's Lair*, but just a different iteration of that. But what I do think is new is that it's on a streaming platform, a very mainstream thing, and you can play it with your TV remote. And if nongamers like



LEFT: Stefan increasingly feels like he's being controlled by someone. And, well, he is.

the idea of interactive storytelling, it might lead them to try something like a Telltale game.

What has the reaction to *Bandersnatch* been like in general?

It's designed so that you should probably sample about two endings and I've been surprised by the number of people trying to get them all. I wasn't expecting anyone to do that, and it wasn't really designed like that. We wanted people to get a couple of endings, hopefully enjoy it, then talk to someone else about what decisions they made.

Some people have said it's too complicated and they don't understand it. Some people have said they're shit at it, which is odd, and take it really personally. And some people have said it's too simple.

One reaction I don't quite get is some people who complain that if they smash up Stefan's computer, or hit some other fail state, they'll be like, 'What's the point if I can just try again?' But nobody complains about fucking Mario when he falls to his death and you lose a life and get to try again. No one goes, 'What was the point of that? Why are Nintendo forcing Mario to continue on through the Mushroom Kingdom?' ■

“SOME PEOPLE HAVE SAID THEY'RE SHIT AT IT, WHICH IS ODD”

REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews



Crunch time

Given this is a review section, I have a review for you. M&S custard creams aren't as tasty as Sainsbury's custard creams. They may look identical, but there is a gulf of taste between them. These M&S biscuits have a weird aftertaste/mouthfeel. It's somewhere between the squeaky tongue effect of overbrewed tea and the cloying mouthfeel after cheap takeout.

Irritatingly, this led me to check the ingredients and I'm now thinking the nice custard creams might be nice because they contain higher amounts of regular sugar AND a bunch of icing sugar. Even more irritatingly, both the bad and the good custard creams contain palm oil so I now need to figure out my stance on that complex issue. Biscuits: 7/10.

Pipx

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LET US KNOW
WHAT YOU THINK

Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



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This month's jammy dodgers...



ANDY KELLY
Specialist in
Waiting, wandering
Currently playing
DayZ
This month
Hung out in a lot of
fields and got very
excited about finding
cans of beans.



PHIL IWANIUK
Specialist in
Jet setting
Currently playing
Ace Combat 7
This month
Belted out Kenny
Loggins' Danger Zone
for five hours straight.
Because authenticity.



IAN BIRNBAUM
Specialist in
Homages
Currently playing
Dusk
This month
Bunny-hopped so hard
he now travels at
lightspeed through all
'90s shooters.



PHILIPPA WARR
Specialist in
Custard creams
Currently playing
Pikuniku
This month
Appreciated playing
as a protagonist who
solves problems by
kicking them.



JOE DONNELLY
Specialist in
Soulslikes
Currently playing
Ashen
This month
Committed to figuring
out when "Soulslike" is
a good thing and when
it's a mortal insult.



SAMUEL ROBERTS
Specialist in
The past
Currently playing
Onimusha: Warlords
This month
Fought the passage
of time by playing
only re-releases.



CHRIS THURSTEN
Specialist in
Leaving
Currently playing
NOTHING
This month
Turned in his badge.
Assuming it was a
badge – it's been
through the laundry.

UNDEAD KING

RESIDENT EVIL 2, a remake of the PlayStation classic, is a masterclass in making an old game feel fresh again. *By Andy Kelly*

One of the most remarkable things about this *Resident Evil 2* remake is that it makes zombies – the slow, shambling, groaning kind – exciting again. The undead in this game are incredible, horrible things: shuffling lumps of bloody meat who batter down doors, tumble through broken windows and lunge hungrily from the shadows. They're physical and clumsy and an absolute joy to kill – if you have the ammo to spare.

Shoot a leg off and they keep coming, dragging themselves along the floor, reaching at you with pale, clawing hands. Turn a corner, and as the beam of your flashlight catches their glassy white eyes they screech and trudge towards you, arms outstretched, jaws slung with glistening blood. They don't sprint or explode or sprout thrashing parasites like they do in newer *Resident Evil* games: they just moan and lurch and grab, and there's something enjoyably back-to-basics about that: a feeling that echoes through every dark, claustrophobic hallway of this confident remake.

After the subversive *Resident Evil 7*, with its grimy Southern Gothic aesthetic and intimate first-person horror, *Resident Evil 2* is a return to a more familiar style of game. It's a remake, but it's never a slave to the source material, adding or cleverly remixing enough elements to make it feel brand new. You can still play as

two characters – Leon S. Kennedy and Claire Redfield – and a few fan favourite bosses and locations have been recreated. But even moments of fan service are given some kind of twist or fresh angle, which is,

honestly, not what I expected from this remake at all.

The grand, imposing Raccoon City Police Department was always a great setting, but the shift to three dimensions makes it magnificent. While the

original game relied on fixed camera angles and the distant moan of unseen zombies to build fear, the remake uses light, shadow and layout to get under your skin. Some parts of the station have been plunged into darkness, forcing you to pick through the gloom with a flashlight. The building itself is a labyrinth of blind corners, shadowy recesses and warren-like corridors, creating a constant feeling of apprehension.

The station is essentially a giant box of puzzles, and an absence of

It's a remake, but it's never a slave to the source material

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A quality remake of a PlayStation favourite.

EXPECT TO PAY

£45

DEVELOPER

Capcom

PUBLISHER

In-house

REVIEWED ON

Core i5-6600K, GTX 1080, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER

None

LINK

www.residentevil2.com

objective markers or other such hand-holding means you have to draft a mental map of the building as you make your way through it. At first most of the building is locked up tight, or obstacles such as the burning wreck of a crashed helicopter block the way forward. But as you explore you find items that let you delve deeper, and slowly but surely the maze of halls, offices, atriums and stairwells starts to feel familiar. I also like how dead zombies stay put, even after reloading a save, as I'd often use their corpses as a kind of macabre breadcrumb trail.

But navigating the station and deciphering its riddles and puzzles is only half the battle. The zombies, as much fun as they are to fight, can take a hell of a beating. Their health seems to be randomised, meaning that you can empty ten bullets into one and it'll keep crawling after you, while another will be put down permanently by just a few shots. This makes them unpredictable and tenacious, as zombies should be. But it also teaches you a hard lesson that every bullet in this remake is precious, and if you can slip past an enemy rather than killing it, you probably should.

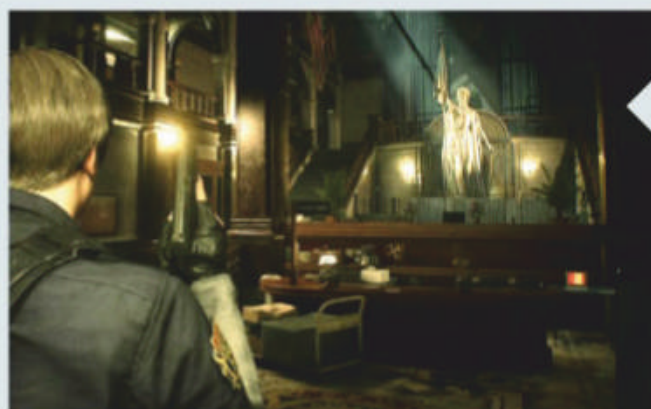
HUNTED DOWN

Then there's the Tyrant, a hulking great mutant in a trench coat for whom gunfire is little more than a

FLASHBACK *The police station, then and now*

JANUARY 21, 1998

The prerendered 640x480 backgrounds of the original game aren't hideous, but the original RPD main hall lacks a little atmosphere.



JANUARY 25, 2019

The new version, on the other hand, benefits from modern lighting (and being 3D, of course), and is much scarier as a result.

The zombies have come a long way since 1998.



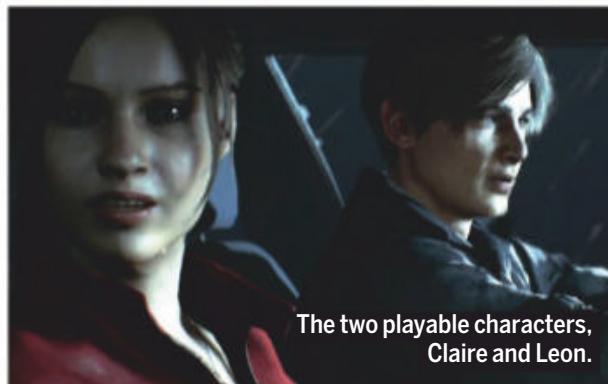
Raccoon City is not tourist friendly.



Exploding heads like this are, oddly, rare.



The two playable characters, Claire and Leon.



Dark areas are super stressful.



The character models are extremely good.



I don't think he wants to shake Leon's hand.



One of a very few survivors you'll meet.



Nothing scary about this hallway at all.



minor inconvenience. At certain points in the game this merciless, invincible killing machine will hunt you around the station with grim persistence. You can track his movements by listening to the heavy thud of his footsteps, but other than blinding him with a flashbang, evasion is your only real option. He's also attracted to gunfire, which adds further weight to decisions involving fighting regular zombies. Do you waste ammunition *and* risk alerting the Tyrant?

The way he walks slowly towards you, unflinching and emotionless, is genuinely unsettling – especially when he suddenly appears at the end of a long corridor. And he's always lurking near items you need to progress, which is brilliantly cruel. But I would have liked more ways to interact with the Tyrant, because eventually these run-ins start to feel rather one-note, and the fear can mutate into frustration. Even the ability to throw something to distract him would have made these sections a bit more interesting, but as it stands the concept feels disappointingly underdeveloped.

Similar to *Resident Evil 4*, the difficulty of the game adapts as you play. How it actually works is obscured, but whatever's going on behind the scenes, the balancing is quite masterful. For the entire nine hours it took me to finish my first run as Leon, I felt constantly on the verge of catastrophic failure. I always had a handful of bullets, little or no health items and I kept wondering if I'd backed myself into an inescapable rut. But I'd always scrape through, and it's hugely impressive how the game managed to maintain this sensation of knife-edge tension from start to finish.

The good news is that if you sacrifice ammo to clear out an area, it'll stay clear. More zombies can spill through open windows, but you can block these up with wooden boards. This gives you some breathing room, especially when you're being chased by the Tyrant. The last thing you need is zombies clawing at you when you're trying to run to safety. Counter-weapons can also tip the balance. If you have a grenade or a combat knife in your inventory and something grabs you while you're

FAN SERVICE *Classic Resi checklist*

- ✓ **INK RIBBONS**
But only on the hardcore difficulty setting. Saves are free in the other modes, but save too often and it affects your rank.
- ✓ **ITEM BOXES**
They work the same way they always have, letting you magically access your stockpile of items from multiple locations.
- ✓ **BONUS MODES**
The Fourth Survivor and The Tofu Survivor, starring Hunk and a block of tofu respectively, are unlockable in the remake.
- ✗ **LOADING DOORS**
You don't have to watch a door slowly opening every time you move into a new room: it's all completely seamless now.
- ✗ **FIXED CAMERA ANGLES**
The whole game is third-person, similar to *Resident Evil 4*, but that doesn't make exploring the RPD building any less tense.
- ✗ **ORIGINAL MUSIC**
The remake has its own new score, but if you buy the 'Deluxe Edition' you get the option to replace it with the classic tunes.

low on health, you'll avoid death: stabbing them with the blade or shoving a grenade in their mouth. So the game isn't completely relentless in its attempts to sabotage you, but for every inch it gives you, it takes one right back.

It's never really that scary, though. Unnerving, tense, and sometimes overwhelmingly stressful, sure, but there's nothing particularly psychological about it. But that was always *Resident Evil's* thing: zombie dogs crashing through windows rather than the psychosexual mind-beasts of *Silent Hill*.

Still, *Resident Evil 7* had some effectively eerie moments, and I would have liked some of that to make its way into this remake. If you can't deal with the stress, there is an 'assisted' difficulty option that adds generous auto-aim and makes a small amount of health regenerate automatically. But, honestly, the game just isn't very exciting when your item box is heaving with an abundance of spare shotgun shells and green herbs.

SECOND WIND

When you finish your first playthrough, you've really only seen half of what the game has to offer. The second run uses the same locations and has many of the same story beats, but the puzzles

are different, enemy types and locations are mixed up, and you take a different route through each of the game's three major locations. What I love about this so-called 'B' scenario is how the game uses your knowledge of the setting against you. Walking into the RPD main hall as Claire, a protected haven for Leon, and seeing zombies in there was a fun subversion. It's just a shame the intensity of the Tyrant is amped up to such a preposterous degree. He's constantly looming over your shoulder, which I ultimately found a bit annoying.

As a longtime fan of the original *Resident Evil 2*, I enjoyed the remake's many self-aware attempts to clarify some of the more abstract stuff in the game – such as why a sewer system is powered by plugs shaped like chess pieces, or why a police station would theme its keys and locks around playing card suits. There are other cute references to the old games to find, but they're pretty subtle and don't feel forced. This could have easily been a game targeted squarely at fans, but if this was your first *Resident Evil* you would get your head around everything in minutes – another example of how refreshingly simple the remake is. The story is really no more complicated than: *zombies everywhere, get to safety*. Which makes even the pared-down narrative of *RE7* seem complex.

Some of the voice acting and writing are pretty bad, and not 'fun bad' like in the old PlayStation games: just regular bad. The second act, which takes place in a dingy sewer, is a little slow. And I was glad when the section where you play as Ada Wong, solving hacking puzzles while the Tyrant stalks you, was over. But otherwise, this is pretty much the ultimate refinement of the classic *Resi* formula – but with the added joy of *RE4's* dynamic over-the-shoulder combat. The result is a game that is among the best in the series, and a thrilling survival horror experience in its own right. It's not as surprising as *RE7*, but as an evolution, and a celebration, of classic *Resident Evil*, you couldn't ask for much more. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A tense, challenging and beautiful remake of a classic, with enough new ideas to make it feel excitingly new.

89



FROM ZERO TO...

Become a ruler, a nomad or a frustrated nobody in **KENSHI**. By Robert Zak

In my time with *Kenshi*, I've crossed swamps so vast that I haven't dared return. I've been beaten shitless by a pack of goats that were intended to feed my rabble of listless nomads. I've been a shopkeeper and a thief, a lone wanderer and a slave, and I've been an entire community of people working together to – one day – erect our own city in the wasteland. One day.

None of these events were part of questlines. There's no such regimentation in *Kenshi*, no tangible sense of scripted behaviour, just a web of vicious systems so numerous that they sometimes tangle and fumble and descend into absurdity.

Upon creating your squad of up to six starting characters, you're dumped into a dauntingly large post-apocalyptic world. All of your skills start at or around zero, and you work on them simply by doing. You'll probably spend your first several hours as a lowly scavenger – sticking to the shadows, levelling up your stealth and scurrying in after skirmishes between the various factions and fauna to loot the dead.

Beyond that? Perhaps you search the wilderness for artefacts or lore titbits, hunt down bounties for the myriad factions, join up with anti-slavers, or set up shop on a trade route and try to make a living.

Through bar-crawling and chance encounters with escaped slaves and other vagabonds, you can recruit new

people, who you then take control of just like your original characters. You can have several squads in different parts of the world if you wish, or train new members as farmers and labourers so that you can build a self-sustaining settlement.

At this point, *Kenshi* becomes a surprisingly effective management game as you research technologies, construct buildings and assign people long lists of automated tasks like mining, farming and construction.

Settlements present their own dangers: out in the wilderness you'll face bandit and animal attacks, while settling near cities may subject you to taxation and other regional rules.

There are a few missions you can pick up by talking to people, but the best stories are those that emerge out of *Kenshi*'s systems. For instance, in the early game, my first companion and I were beset by slavers, who took one of us captive while the other managed to escape. I licked my wounds, gathered my wits and took it upon myself to rescue my friend.

The best stories are those that emerge out of *Kenshi*'s systems

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A vast, rustic RPG survival sandbox.

EXPECT TO PAY
£23

DEVELOPER
Lo-Fi Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Core i7-4790k, Radeon 390X, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
www.lofigames.com

After some hours of scavenging, I saved up enough money to hire a mercenary band. We raided the camp and rescued my comrade, but it didn't end there, as his shaved-head-and-shackles look meant that authorities would identify him as an escapee and attempt to recapture him. So began a survival experience in the wilderness while his bounty expired.

OLD SCHOOL

Kenshi's mechanics and UIs have an arcane MMO feel, which can get cumbersome. Combat is automated, though you can set defensive postures, order ranged attacks and play around with formations. Movement, meanwhile, is mouse-based, with the WASD keys controlling the camera. While the combat is functional, given how many people you can end up controlling, things can get fiddly when you're managing inventories, transferring items between ten or more people, and trying to get your settlement running as efficiently as possible.

The early game can be cruel; basic survival plans can be derailed by a guard who plants drugs on you and demands money you don't have, or by finding yourself in a region inhabited by vicious alien giraffes. It can all get a bit grindy, too; it takes a long time before you can handle yourself in a fight, grow food and travel.

After around 30 hours, I still feel like I've so much to uncover. I've still got to expand from a dustbowl community to a fortress; to send an expedition of warriors out into distant wilds while back at the township workers rake in profits thanks to the clockwork-like regimen I created. *Kenshi* is huge, amoral and opaque enough that I'll be deciphering it for a very long time. ■

SYSTEM OVERLOAD *Three stories from the systemic mind of Kenshi*



A WARM WELCOME

I got into a bar fight by shitmouthing a local. Town guards streamed into the bar, battered them to near-death and dumped them in the street.



SLAVE TO GRAVE

I dropped a bounty off, only to find all the cells full. To make room, I broke a prisoner out. The freed captive was then killed for being a fugitive.



TAX INVASION

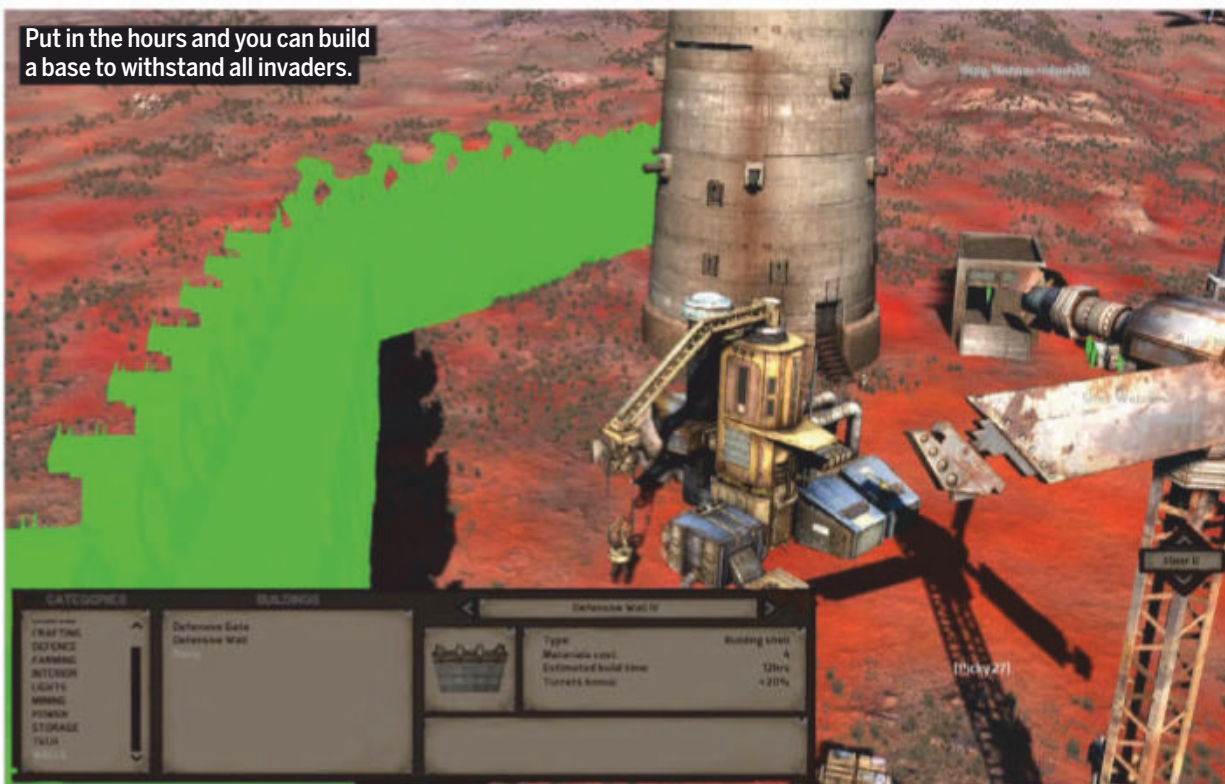
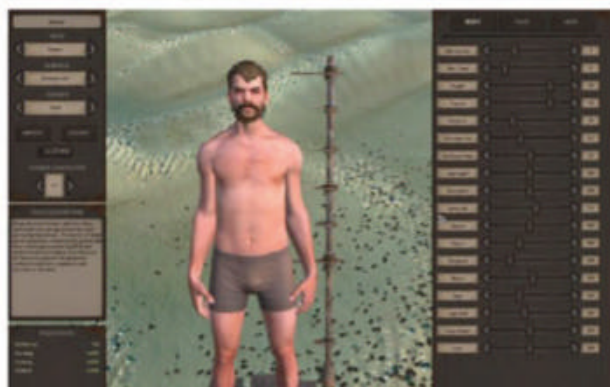
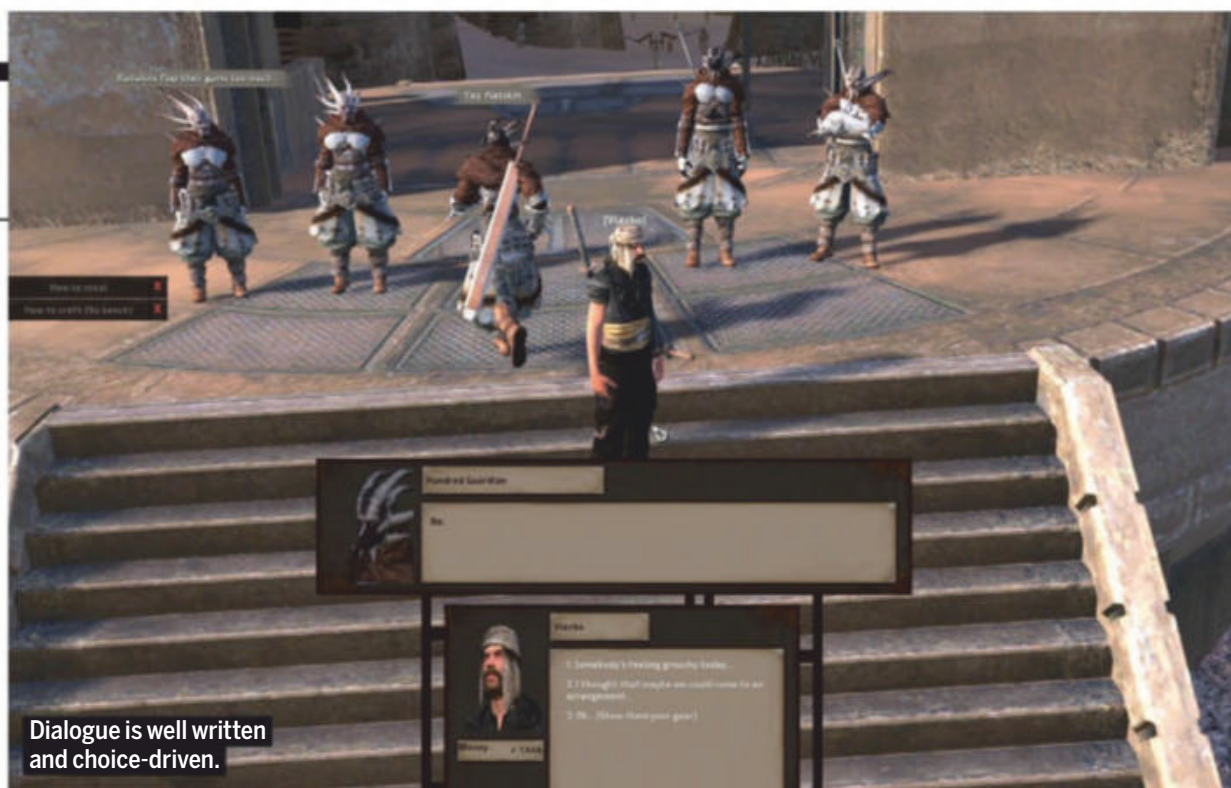
A nearby city sent a squad to rough me up for tax evasion. I hired some mercs, made a murder party in my camp and looted all the bodies.

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Work through the ugliness and technical awkwardness and you'll find an experience of frightening depth.

84



DARUDE AWAKENING

INSURGENCY: SANDSTORM eclipses blockbuster military shooters on a fraction of the budget. *By Phil Iwaniuk*

I'll never forget the screaming. We'd just locked down checkpoint C, a three-storey townhouse in a war-torn village, and the six of us had taken up positions guarding all windows and entry points, waiting for the counterattack. First a silence, then a racket of assault rifle bullets and panicked shouts. We were repelling them. The timer had almost expired. Then a squadmate threw a speculative incendiary grenade at a doorway, and the screaming started. The area was being contested, and the insurgent contesting it had just been set alight. The round ended with six of us watching in mute horror as he crawled, wailing, through the fire, into the hallway where he eventually expired.

This unscripted moment from one of *Insurgency: Sandstorm*'s eight-player co-op matches against waves of AI forces really does speak to its qualities. Not just the eerily convincing soundscapes it conjures, full of dialogue and terrifying reverberations, and not just the inherent tension of its control point-based modes. It also demonstrates an ability to convey the ugliness and horror of modern military combat, without the need for overwrought scripted sequences as with *Battlefield* and *Call Of Duty*. Not bad for a franchise that started life as a *Half-Life 2* mod.

Sandstorm is equally brilliant as a co-op or competitive multiplayer game, offering competent large-scale 16v16 fights featuring vehicles, but really excelling at tighter encounters on maps with fewer combatants. The exact nature of the conflict you're fighting and dying for is nonspecific but the reference points span *Black Hawk Down* to *Zero Dark Thirty* via *The Hurt Locker*, in other words a patchwork of post-millennium war in the Middle East. In among the men

in bomb vests sprinting at you and the RPG fire, what stands out in particular is that no one's playing the hero. Instead, every player-controlled and AI soldier sounds terrified. They shout out when they spot an enemy, when they need to reload, or when an objective state has changed, but they never sound like they're relishing the fight like *Call Of Duty*'s psychopathic operatives do. They're bricking it, like any sane person would be. I'd love to see *Sandstorm*'s code to understand how its

developer managed to trigger appropriate canned dialogue at just the right moment.

The game's soldiers have plenty of reason to sound terrified in a given match, treated to very few lulls in the action and bombarded by surprise attacks. Co-op consists of a series of checkpoint captures, in sequence, while AI combatants attack each one in waves. Competitive modes range from Hardpoint-like power struggles to traditional two-to-three point control scenarios. There's no attempt to reinvent the wheel, nor any great imperative to do so. *Insurgency*:

You can take pride in playing like a professional soldier

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Multiplayer manshooting with a focus on realism.

EXPECT TO PAY
£26

DEVELOPER
New World Interactive

PUBLISHER
Focus Home Interactive

REVIEWED ON
Core i5 6500, GTX 1070, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Up to 32 players

LINK
www.insurgency-sandstorm.com

Sandstorm just gets on with doing the fundamentals brilliantly.

Weapon behaviour takes a bit of getting used to, mind you. There's no extra layer of visual or sonic feedback for successfully shooting an opponent, so you're sometimes at a loss as to whether your long-range shots connected or not. It's a concession to realism that *Insurgency: Sandstorm* absolutely convinces you is worth making. Eventually the absence of hit confirmations becomes something you actively enjoy, just like those moments you remember to lean around a corner and hit your mark. The active reload system is another thing you can take satisfaction in mastering. Here, more than anywhere except arguably *Arma*, you can take tremendous pride in playing like a professional soldier and forgetting about your kill-death ratio.

DRIVE CRAZY

If nits must be picked, it's the vehicles that stick out for their rough and ready implementation. I've had some great moments in the gunner seat of a converted pickup, true, but the vehicle handling itself and the extent to which map design actually accommodates them just isn't quite there. There's the lightest touch of jankiness reminding you this isn't a triple-A shooter, but it's only with vehicles that you feel the experience actually suffers for it.

Even with those creases, I haven't played a multiplayer shooter as exciting as this for ages, and I'll be coaxing friends into its co-op mode for months to come. I'll also try – and fail – to describe just how good it sounds from moment to moment to anyone who'll listen. See you at checkpoint C. ■

A TOUCH OF CLASS *Intel on Sandstorm's combat roles*



COMMANDER
Stick close by to an observer and you can call in artillery strikes on the enemy.



OBSERVER
The Laurel to the Commander's Hardy. Gets to radio in the big guns.



BREACHER
Close-quarters specialists who live and breathe shotguns. Scary folk.

PC GAMER VERDICT

In this most well-travelled of multiplayer FPS paths, *Insurgency: Sandstorm* feels fresh and exciting at every turn.

85



INK PIECE

Painterly platformer **GRIS** aims to explore grief. *By Philippa Warr*

Gris is beautiful. It is beautiful in that highly stylised, minimalist way that works well in both 2D platformers and in art prints. It is beautiful in its carefully chosen colour palettes and its delicate animation effects. However it is beautiful in ways that both strengthen and weaken it as an overall experience.

Gris is a 2D platforming mood piece about navigating grief. You play as a nimble, blue-haired girl and you must gradually bring colour and life back to a world of monochrome ruins. To do this, the girl must jump, float, swim and slam her way through stunning environments, collecting glowing lights and adding them to the sky above a hub area as constellations.

Tonally, *Gris* inhabits the same arena as *Journey*, *Abzu*, *Unravel*, *Flower*... perhaps *Monument Valley* too, although not as closely due to the latter's puzzle elements. *Gris* isn't a puzzler, it's a platformer with a set of interactions which feel geared around sensory pleasure – you end up luxuriating in its environments and effects, or enjoying the smoothness of a set of movements.

To give an example, clusters of red butterflies boost your jumps. In another game this boost might feel like part of a toolkit for exploration, but *Gris* has generally linear progression. At that point, the boost isn't a tool it's part of the level's built-in choreography. At its best, *Gris*

enables you to chain boosts together with other interactions and create a lovely flow and cadence.

As an exploration of grief, or an emotional journey, *Gris* finds mixed success. Its determination to be beautiful is a problem here because it

means the ugly and destructive sides of grief or loss are absent.

The closest you get in terms of what the girl can do is the ability to turn her cloak into a heavy cube and use it to smash vases, punch through crumbling

floors, or plummet deeper into the water. It's destructive, sure, but it's also controlled and purposeful. The wilder, scarier side of grief is cut off from her; cauterised in favour of fluid, deliberate action. It's perhaps found in some of the shadowy creatures which pursue her, but that's external rather than internal.

The other problem is that the grief is never effectively localised to a particular person. Is the girl the one grieving, or is it her companion (she seems to be the one shattered into pieces)? Being ambiguous isn't a problem per se, but I felt unable to

The ugly and destructive sides of grief or loss are absent

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
2D platforming journey through grief.

EXPECT TO PAY
£14.50

DEVELOPER
Nomada Studio

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Core i7-5820k,
GTX 970, 16GB RAM,
Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
www.nomada.studio

read the basic emotional arc as a coherent journey.

PAINTING A PICTURE

This next paragraph is a spoiler so skip ahead if you'd prefer to be completely in the dark.

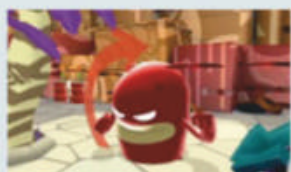
Another issue I have is that the ending of the game is positive; a reunification of sorts. I find it to be a stumbling block when considering *Gris* as a representation of grief. It's too neat; a manifestation of the idea that grief ends when I don't believe it ever does. One of the best descriptions of grief I've ever heard is about how grief is not a specific feeling, but a reckoning with what can't be undone. It changes over time, for sure, but it's an ongoing confrontation, rather than a path to a full resolution.

Gris is beautiful, but for me that beauty means it's only capable of touching on some of the facets of loss. It offers some of the colourless strangeness of the world after a loss and the seeping in of colour as you open back up. It manages some of the sense of being at the mercy of the outside world. The way it plays with scale shifts your focus from the girl to the world and back again; a tool for simulating numbness or distance.

But it can't do the same for rage or guilt or the way your insides seem to be absent sometimes. The beauty gets in the way there. It's too self-conscious, and too wrapped up in being aesthetically pleasing. It's too tied to the idea of a neat conclusion. It's so caught up in the language of recurring motifs that it doesn't notice when the emotional arc loses clarity.

The overall effect for me ends up being elegant but detached. A slightly muddled compendium of the picturesque sides of grief. ■

COLOURING IN *Other games with a focus on colour*



DE BLOB

Pick up paint and smear the city with colour by touching it with your character's body.



THE UNFINISHED SWAN

Fire blobs of ink into a plain white world to reveal the 3D landscape.



SPLATOON

Nintendo's third-person shooter swaps bullets for ink which covers the play area.



HUE

Change the background colour of the world to reveal or hide objects and solve puzzles.

PC GAMER VERDICT

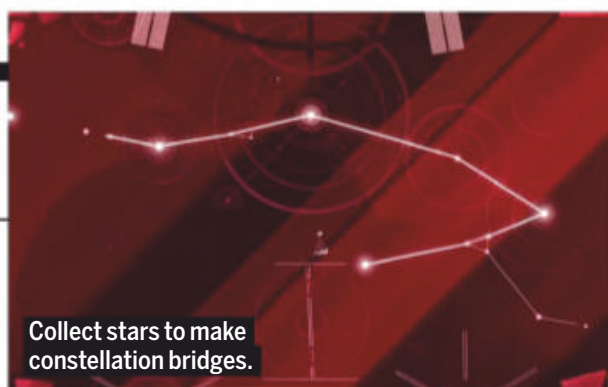
Gris's visual appeal hinders as much as it helps its attempted exploration of the grief process.

66

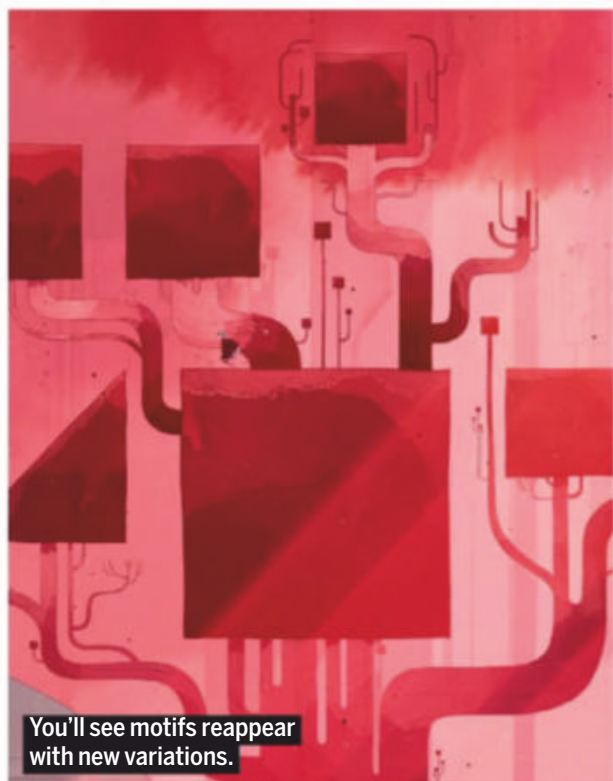
Shifts in palette
accompany shifts in mood.



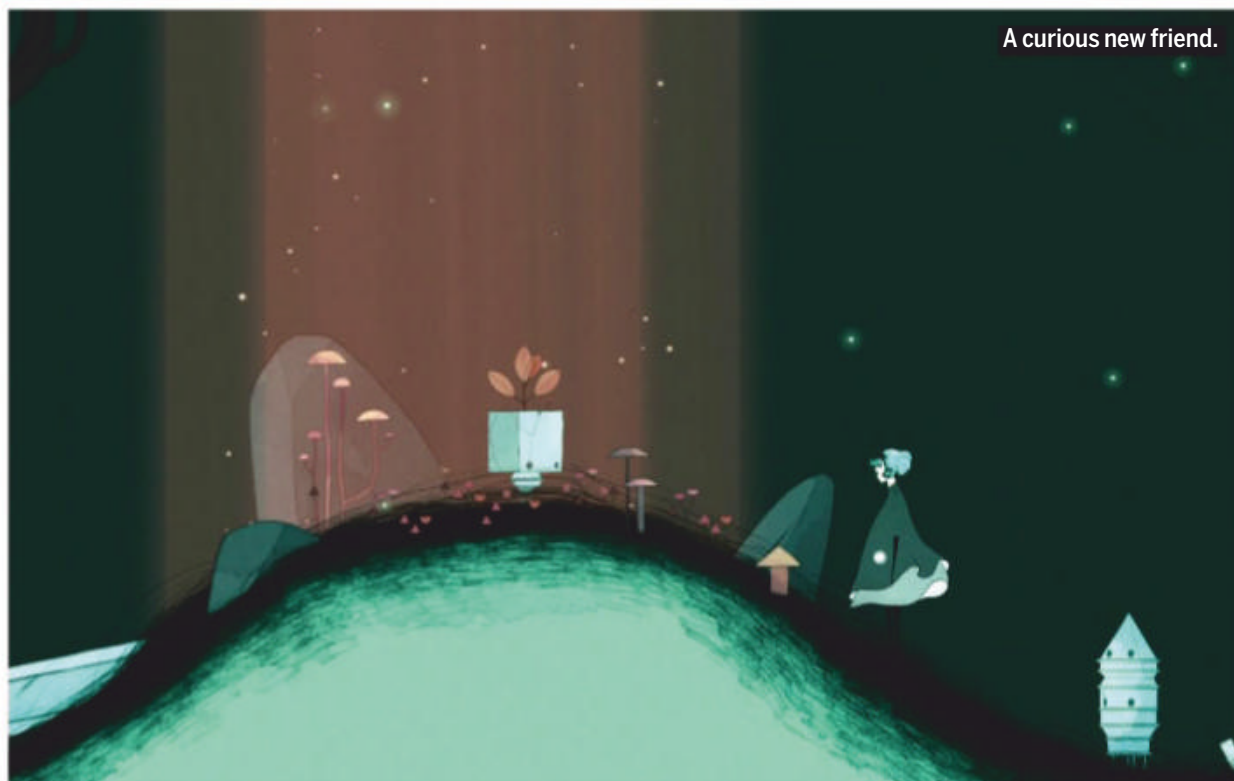
Collect stars to make
constellation bridges.



Grand Designs is getting
more extreme.



You'll see motifs reappear
with new variations.



A curious new friend.

QUAKING

DUSK perfectly captures and reloads the joy of classic '90s shooters. *By Ian Birnbaum*

I was just about hip-deep in corpses and spent shotguns shells when I read the writing on the wall. Scrawled in blood, a message: 'Don't go in the ruins.' I heard a raspy noise behind me. It wasn't quite an animal sound, but it wasn't human, either. I turned and found something much worse than a bad guy. A closed door marked Ruins Access. The raspy breathing came again from just behind it. I felt an actual chill run down my back.

Dusk is a homage to late '90s corridor shooters like Doom, Quake and Half-Life. It's also a love letter to weird cultist horror films like The Hills Have Eyes and Deliverance. More importantly, it's great. Dusk is fucking great.

Waking up hanging from a meathook is at least the third-worst way to wake up. At the beginning of Dusk, I'm meathooked, trapped in a hostile world and mostly unarmed. Like the '90s shooters it

draws inspiration from, the first tool Dusk gives players is speed. Pressing the forward button zips me along the ground, and, charmingly, bunnyhopping adds momentum just like it used to in the old days. With a heavy W-finger and a lot of jumping, exploring the creepy farmhouses and industrial buildings of Dusk's first chapter felt like touring a videogame art museum on a motorcycle.

It's not speed for speed's sake; I'm moving fast because it's the only way

to survive. There are a lot of different enemies in Dusk, from possessed scarecrows to hooded Klansmen throwing dark magic, but almost all of them charge straight ahead with melee attacks or shoot swarms of

projectiles at me. The variety of enemies, some big, some small, shooting bullets that move at different speeds, makes every fight a constantly changing obstacle course. The only way to navigate a crowded

field of shooty monsters and bullets is to move, to run circles around the bad guys, kite them into big groups or toward explosive barrels, and shoot as fast as I can.

Speed is the first, but it's not the only tool. Starting with a pair of sharp sickles and moving up through the traditional FPS loadout closet, I shot demons and bad guys with pistols, lever-action rifles, double-barreled super shotguns, assault rifles, sniper rifles and grenade

Dusk's first chapter felt like touring a videogame art museum

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A '90s-inspired fast-paced FPS with horror themes

EXPECT TO PAY
£15

DEVELOPER
David Szymanski
PUBLISHER
New Blood Interactive

REVIEWED ON
Core i5 4690k, 16GB RAM, GTX 970, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
Up to 16 players

LINK
www.bit.ly/newbloodinteractive

launchers. The most unexpected weapon I've found so far is the Riveter, a bulky steel box that launches hot construction-grade welding rivets that, for some reason, explode spectacularly. I'm not sure why a rivet driver might act this way, but it is extremely enjoyable.

The blocky graphics in Dusk are its most obvious throwback reference to the era of games it idolizes, but damn if they don't look great anyway. The sharp polygons of enemy bodies might be two decades out of date, but very modern takes on advanced lighting and particle effects did a lot to make me feel interested in exploring and blowing up the world around me. The limited polygons and low-res textures have a jagged, unreal quality that makes corn mazes look creepy and country churches look properly cursed by evil magics.

The singleplayer portion of Dusk is broken into three campaigns. Starting from that first moment in that weirdo's murder-dungeon, I fought my way through farms, industrial zones and apartment buildings until I had completely wiped out the cultist and/or demon population of Dusk, Pennsylvania.

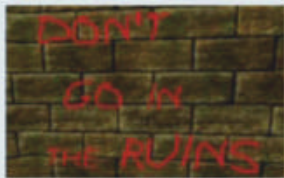
I had honestly expected Dusk to be a more straightforward recreation of '90s shooters, including a generic or nonexistent story. Instead, the biggest surprise for me was discovering a genuinely interesting, gripping little horror story on offer.

BLOODY WORDS *Analysing Dusk's gory graffiti*



A nice 'fuck you' on your way out has a defiant appeal, but dying is no excuse for sloppy handwriting.

Spookiness: 1/10
Style: 7/10
Execution: 1/10



This one's elegantly self-explanatory. Where shouldn't you go? The ruins. Where *should* you go? Not the ruins.

Spookiness: 7/10
Style: 4/10
Execution: 8/10



That's the spirit! Just because you're dying doesn't mean you can't put some positivity into the world.

Spookiness: 2/10
Style: 4/10
Execution: 6/10



Oh my god, get out of there. GET OUT OF THERE!

Spookiness: 10/10
Style: 10/10
Execution: 10/10

SEEK AND DESTROY

This is where Dusk became more than a parody or homage to a once-ubiquitous genre and started kicking ass on its own terms. The bare, pixelated corridors of yore have been replaced by low-poly, but recognisable and memorable, level and environment design. I only ever discovered hallways in classic Doom, but in Dusk I fought bad guys in bars, bookshops, bedrooms, labs, hay lofts, gas stations and convenience stores.

Dusk insists on using the classic trope of locked doors and coloured

Is it a ghost? Not sure, but it dies if you shoot it.



Meeting a scarecrow in a cornfield is terrifying, but at least you've got big guns.



Gibs are like the guns that make them: the chunkier, the better.



Shoot explosive crates and barrels to take down mobs.



Dusk may look retro, but it feels refreshingly modern.

This church seems very welcoming.



The graphics don't look like much, but a blood geyser is good clean fun any day.



Facing a trio of chainsaw guys isn't exactly fair, but it is fun.



Bars in the '90s used very different decorations.



When the music ramps up, grab your biggest gun and start running.

keycards. Modern shooters have mostly left that conceit behind because it makes players do a lot of backtracking through empty levels. Having distinct environments filled with recognisable decorations like furniture goes a long way to fixing this problem, though. I could usually just think to myself, 'Oh, the yellow door is in the book store,' and go find my way there quickly enough. Clever changes in geography, like a floor falling in or a hidden door opening, also help mix up paths through levels.

More than that, developer David Szymanski has a talent for environmental storytelling that goes way beyond the tableaux I've discovered in games from much larger studios. Once, while venturing through a pitch black subterranean jail with a flashlight, I got hit from behind. I turned and fired, but there was nothing there. Then, in the cone of my flashlight, I saw blood spatters in the shape of footprints moving toward me, marking the steps of an invisible bad guy.

I started shooting, and a demonic deer-type creature roared out of the darkness and attacked again. I dodged and shot, and finally the deer collapsed at the base of a wall. Immediately above the fresh corpse, I read by my flashlight another message in blood:

'Don't trust your eyes.' This moment of discovery, and the sensation that the game was toying with me, was better than any dozen skeletons I've discovered in post-apocalyptic toilets.

Each level is surprisingly compact, using those color-coded locks to send players running back and forth across relatively small spaces. Still, every area is full of tiny corners and hidden walkways. Sometimes, but not always, pressing a piece of wall opens a hidden door or shooting an air grate blows open a secret passage. Without rushing, the average *Dusk* level took me about 12 minutes to finish. These bitesized pieces of mayhem and action made it really easy for me to pick up *Dusk* and put it down a few minutes later, and the built-in level timers will be great for speedrunners.

CRAZY TRAIN

I had no issues running *Dusk* on my GTX 970 at its highest graphics settings, and I saw rock-solid

CLASS OF 1990-ISH *More great retro-style shooters*

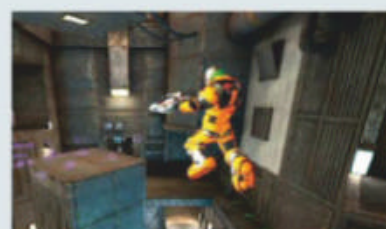


QUAKE CHAMPIONS

Price: Free-to-play

Link: www.bit.ly/quakechamps

It's the old-school gunplay of a '90s arena shooter combined with more modern FPS touches, including a roster of characters all with distinct abilities. Amazingly, it works.

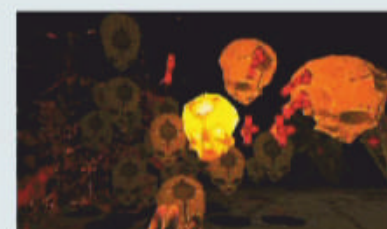


XONOTIC

Price: Free

Link: www.xonotic.org

If you want your arena action more pure and open, *Xonotic* is your best bet. Thanks to an active community of creators, it offers thousands of custom maps and modes.



DEVIL DAGGERS

Price: £4

Link: www.devildaggers.com

Short on time? A round of *Devil Daggers* can last just seconds. This is an intense and eerie arcade shooter that asks how long you can survive against a hellish horde.

framerates in crowded rooms full of exploding barrels and blood geysers. You would expect a game with a retro look not to struggle on modern hardware, but I was still happy to see *Dusk* run smoothly even in a firefight's most frantic moments. When I bunnyhopped my way to top speed and tore through a level with a fully-stocked grenade launcher, even minor stuttering or screen tearing would have been a disaster.

Dusk's soundtrack is also phenomenal. It's got a heavy metal flavour that makes me think of *Doom*

– no surprise that it was written by Andrew Hulshult, the composer behind *Brutal Doom* and *Quake Champions* – and it really is a stunner. It's also got a relentless, driving quality that makes me think more of Mad

Max: Fury Road than Rip & Tear.

Dusk's multiplayer mode is a more direct throwback to the original *Quake*, and it wasn't as successful at grabbing my attention. The high-speed bunnyhopping makes aiming at human opponents much more challenging than singleplayer modes, and fans of old-school *Quake* deathmatches will enjoy searching levels and memorising spawns for the strongest weapons. Matchmaking was fast and rounds start with very little downtime. The guns still feel strong and punchy, and the arenas I explored used a lot of vertical space to bring battles way above and below ground level.

I think I was much less taken with the multiplayer modes because they felt like more direct recreations

of '90s classics like *Quake*. To be clear, the multiplayer mode is completely fine. But when the singleplayer is this good, a 'fine' multiplayer mode was bit of a letdown. Multiplayer lacked the careful reinvention, the painstaking spiritual reimagination that the singleplayer mode captured so effectively. Maybe it's not fair to expect Szymanski to capture lightning in a bottle twice, but there it is. If I wanted to play *Quake*, I'd play *Quake* – thousands of people do that every summer at QuakeCon.

My dissatisfaction with multiplayer helped me zero in on what I love so much about *Dusk's* singleplayer. It just isn't enough to remake old games with old graphics. After all, the originals still exist. No, *Dusk* is brilliant because it understands that replaying those old games is frequently kind of a letdown. *Half-Life* is a classic, but playing it today shows how different parts of it haven't aged well. The graphics are more bare than in my memories, and the animations are more stilted. It was groundbreaking, but it's just not quite as fun as it was when it first blew my mind in 1998. *Dusk* doesn't recreate what FPS games were like in the '90s just to do it again. *Dusk* instead captures how those games feel now in my mind, tinted by 20 years of rose-colored memories. It shouldn't be possible, and it's a remarkable achievement. ■



PC GAMER VERDICT

A obsessively tuned, finely crafted shooter that captures and recreates the speed and pure joy of '90s classics.

89

KICKING OFF

Bouncing into **PIKUNIKU**'s colourful dystopian deep state scheme. *By Philippa Warr*

I first saw *Pikuniku* at EGX. On a show floor you can't appreciate nuance, so I'll be honest: it was the bright, round characters which drew me over. I stayed because I could kick things with my character's little red legs. I didn't have enough time to do much more than that so, when it came to the review, it was such a lovely moment to realise it wasn't a *Wattam*-style interactive toy, but a little dystopian tale wearing a Mr Men and Little Miss storybook aesthetic.

After an opening cinematic where a pink cloud offers you free money, you, a little red blob with legs, wake up in a cave on a hill overlooking a town. A useful exposition ghost prompts you to head into the fresh air so you can start exploring the 2D world. Jumping, rolling, strolling and kicking are your primary forms of interaction. At first you're just playing with them, perhaps enjoying the fact you can go a bit faster if you pull your legs in and roll, or bounce around, trying to kick anything in the environment.

The local villagers believed you to be a scary beast and are not entirely sure how to handle the fact that you're actually smaller than them, not threatening beyond delivering grumpy toddler-style kicks and pushes, and don't look anything like their local beast lore descriptions. They settle on imprisoning you until you agree to repair the rope bridge connecting the village to the village

crops (which you broke by bouncing on it) so that the villagers can tend their corn and be rewarded with rains of cash from the pink cloud.

What evolves from there is a cheery tale of an endearingly bumbling and adorably illustrated violent resistance against a deep state social cleansing conspiracy. Despite that premise, the tone never tips over into insufferable didacticism. Instead it remains at 'more

affable and PG version of a Dr Evil plot from Austin Powers' for the duration. Supporting that tone, the rest of the cast of characters have that specifically 2010s slight archness to them which keeps them from becoming twee.

For example, after kicking a couple of eggs I found in a nest and watching the chicks they contained flap off, a mother bird descended. She demanded to know whether I kicked the eggs and I chose to deny all knowledge. I was still standing in the

The local villagers believed you to be a scary beast

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An adorably presented dystopian tale.

EXPECT TO PAY
TBA

DEVELOPERS
Arnaud De Bock, Rémi Forcadell, Alan Zucconi, Calum Bowen

PUBLISHER
Devolver Digital

REVIEWED ON
Core i7-5820k, GTX 970, 16GB RAM, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
Local co-op

LINK
www.pikuniku.net

nest and she replied, "What do you mean it wasn't you? Your feet are still on the shells!" Rounding up the chicks to make amends, one of them turned out to be a huffy teen ("why can't I have my own life already") and the other was fully conversant in self-help speak ("it's true we haven't bonded very much lately").

Basic platforming is the canvas against which these little interactions play out. At first that's jumping from ledge to ledge and pushing or kicking objects. Later you can start swapping your hats or using different objects to trigger new interactions. For example, one hat turns you into a mobile sprinkler system. If you target particular plants they'll flower and provide a temporary platform which will let you access a new part of the level.

HATS OFF

It's these hats and objects which generally help you access all the little Easter eggs hidden around the world. It's why I'm still playing even though I've long since completed the main story. There are secret areas to visit, dungeons to explore, a wizard to please and glasses to purchase.

It's not a perfect experience. I got frustrated with the bridge repair section before accidentally finding the solution, and I completely forgot where to find a particular character I needed for a quest. For the latter I ended up using my screenshots to piece together the location info as nothing in-game reminded me. The balance between exploration and design prompts or interface info thus feels slightly off in places. Otherwise, the game is small enough that messing about will reveal the way forward, and offer up adorable interactions along the way. ■

DEGREE OF SEPARATION

Other games by the people behind Pikuniku



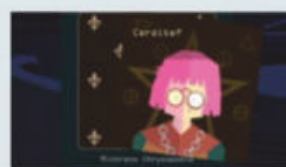
GIRAFFES VOLLEYBALL CHAMPIONSHIP 2016
Remi Forcadell's game lets giraffes dunk each other.



LOVELY PLANET
Prior to *Pikuniku*, sound designer Calum Bowen worked on this charmingly cute, speedy first-person shooter.



ORBITALIS
Dev and lecturer Alan Zucconi made this physics puzzler about using gravity and launching satellites into orbit.



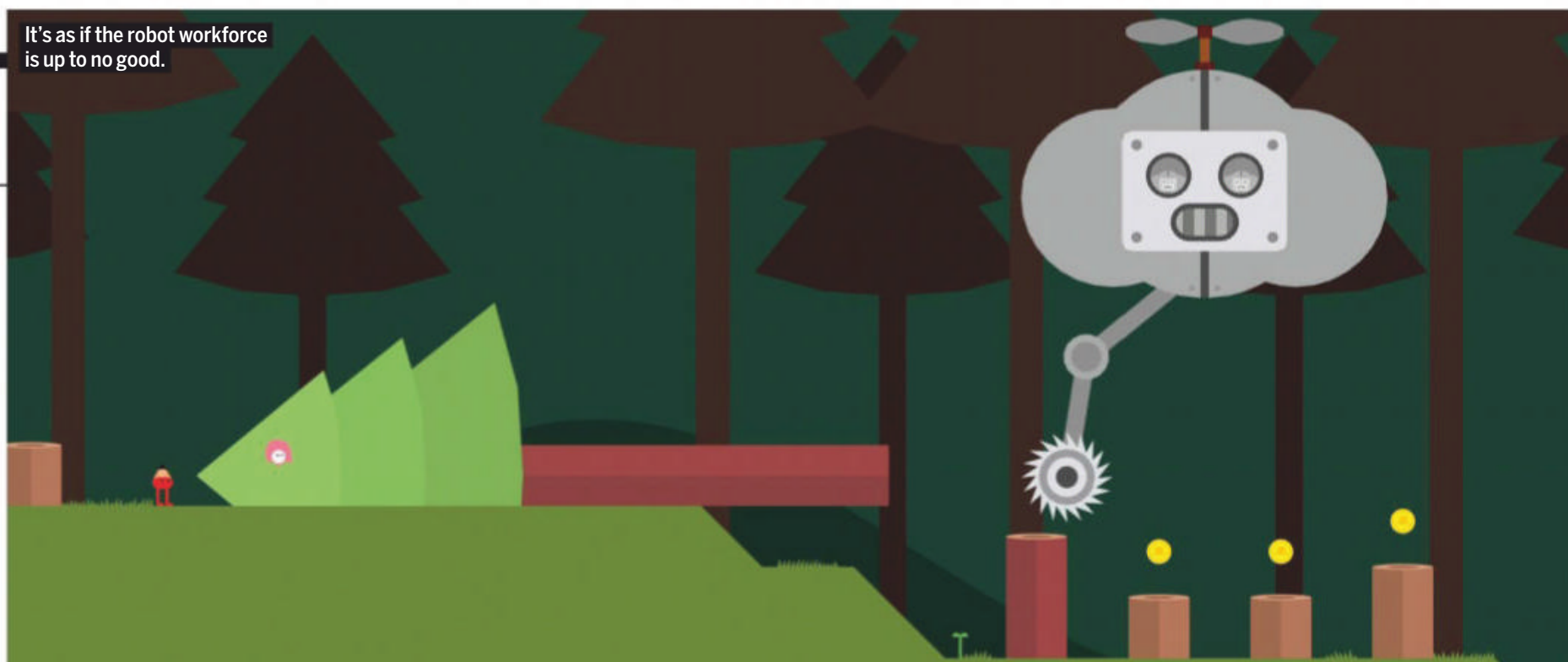
REIGNS: HER MAJESTY
Arnaud De Bock did the art for this strategy title and the *Reigns: Game of Thrones* crossover.

PC GAMER VERDICT

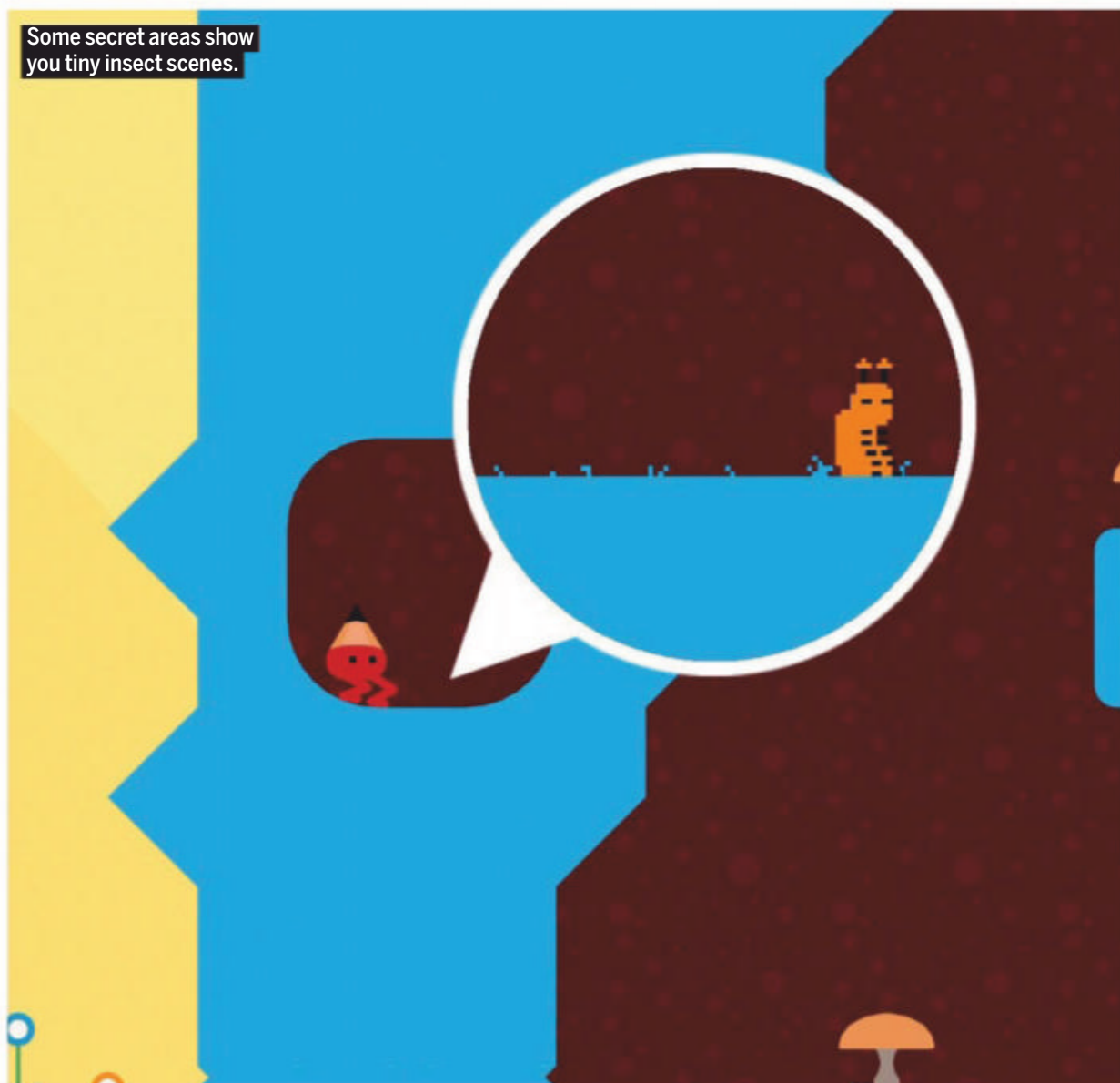
A wonderfully absurd tale of insurrection and kicking stuff in a cheery-looking storybook-like world.

79

It's as if the robot workforce is up to no good.



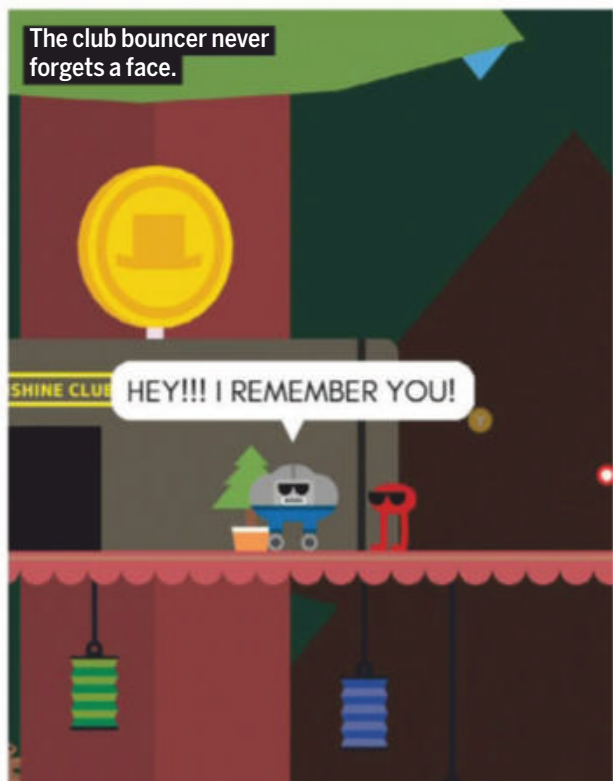
Some secret areas show you tiny insect scenes.



This dungeon is full of aggressive toast.



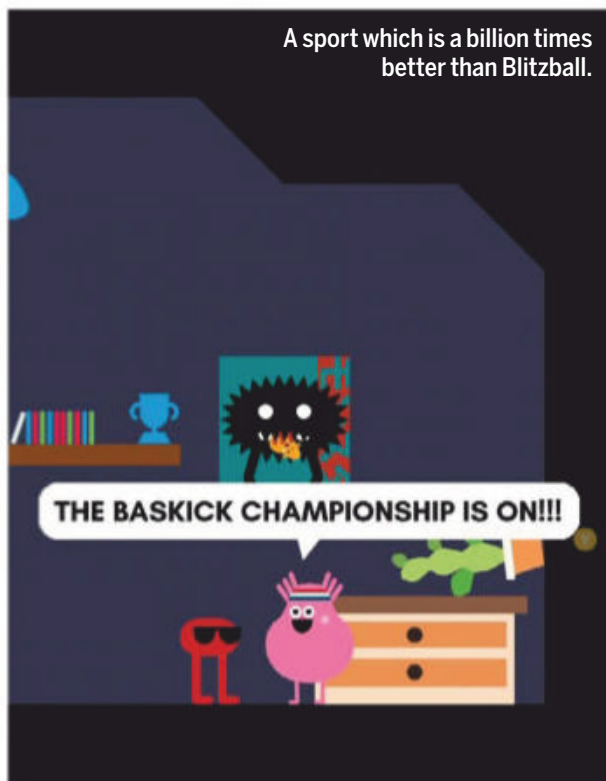
The club bouncer never forgets a face.



you... don't look very frightening...



A sport which is a billion times better than Blitzball.



SOUL MATE

ASHEN is a thoughtful, engrossing Soulslike that wears its inspirations on its blood-stained sleeve. *By Joe Donnelly*

Some people will argue the 'Soulslike' label needs to die. They'll tell you it's overused, hackneyed and that there are other catch-all terms to describe hybrid ARPGs, which don't rely on comparison. I think these people are wrong. *Ashen*, a low-fantasy action roleplayer, closely echoes many of the ideas and systems found in FromSoftware's *Dark Souls* series. It knows exactly who its audience is, and, for all intents and purposes, is a Soulslike game.

In place of Estus Flasks, for example, *Ashen* gives players sap-filled Crimson Gourds that deliver health boosts in limited supply. In the absence of Souls, *Ashen* trades in Scoria – a currency farmed from fallen enemies that helps facilitate progression. Gathered Scoria is lost upon death, and can only be regained in your immediate next life. Likewise, resting at Ritual Stones replenishes vitality, a la *Dark Souls*' bonfires, at the expense of reinstating fallen foes within the world. *Ashen*'s enemies are tough, its bosses are blockbuster and its gorgeous handcrafted world is littered with ambiguous lore and odd but charming NPCs.

So similar to the *Soulsborne* series is *Ashen* that these comparisons will inevitably attract or avert players from the outset. This reflects the polarising nature of this style of game, but, by setting out its stall with precision and conviction, *Ashen* never feels cynical. *Ashen* also leaves little

room for learning curves during its 20-ish hours runtime. But I reckon it's all the better for it.

In the wake of the game's titular 'Ashen' rebirth, *Ashen* paints a familiar tale of light versus dark, which ultimately boils down to: all the goodies in the world want the light to survive, and all the baddies want it extinguished. The overworld is often described as the 'twilight plains', while its beastie-infested

dungeons are, by nature, drab and packed with terrors.

Ashen regularly switches from sprawling open world to claustrophobic grotto during the game's scores of quests, requiring you to adapt your playstyle accordingly. Early on, I found myself fumbling around the Restless Knoll; a large wooded area filled with spear-wielding enemies. Encountering two foes at the foot of a hill, I let my AI-controlled NPC partner Jokell engage them from the front as I snuck back around and got the drop

Ashen leaves little room for learning curves during its runtime

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A low-fantasy Soulslike action RPG

EXPECT TO PAY
£36

DEVELOPER
A44

PUBLISHER
Annapurna Interactive

REVIEWED ON
Core i5-6600K, GTX 980, 8GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
www.ashen-game.com

from above. It was a markedly different style of play to when we later plumbed the depths of a Tomb of the Giants-style dungeon, brimming with traps, winding corridors and shadow monsters. In these moments *Ashen*'s stamina-based combat comes into its own.

OBSERVE AND OVERCOME

In any fight, understanding the lay of the land is crucial, and while conflicts out in the field can be judged in advance, battles indoors often unfold in tight, dimly-lit areas. Different weapons have different stamina demands, and shrewd use of light and heavy attacks is essential for survival. Do you steam in with an RMB double-handed axe smash and hope for the best, or do you offload a flurry of LMB light attacks and Shift dodge your way to success? Judge well or die hard, my friend.

And speaking of friends, *Ashen*'s co-op is wonderful. AI companions offer sidequests and will often tag along for the journey, while you can band together with real-world players for specific missions and part ways whenever you so choose. You can go your own way if you like, but I'd always recommend against it because a) I'm a shitebag and b) every time I went it alone, I wound up crying for a buddy's help anyway after a new wave of misadventure.

To say *Ashen* borrows liberally from FromSoftware's *Soulsborne* series is an understatement, but here the 'Soulslike' label is a compliment not a pejorative. Yes, *Ashen* echoes the core mechanics of *Dark Souls*, but it does so with such finesse that it hardly matters. Its passive co-op offers new insights into the genre, and the variety of its beautiful world is an absolute joy. ■

DOPPELGÄNGER Compare and contrast Ashen's Soulslike systems



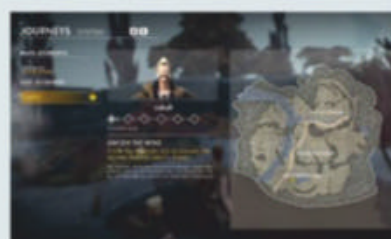
GEAR

Ashen's 'Gear' menu is reminiscent of *Dark Souls*, with its cyclable weapons, outfits, consumables and buffs.



ARTIFACTS

Likewise, *Ashen*'s 'Artifacts' tab houses special items – each of which has its own suggestive lore snippet.



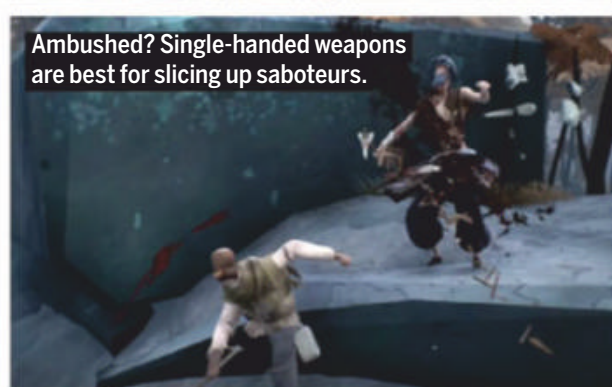
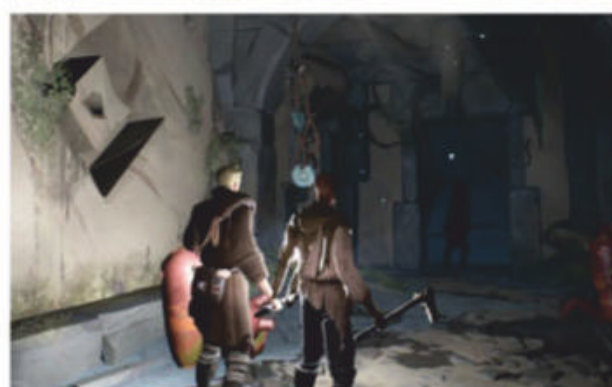
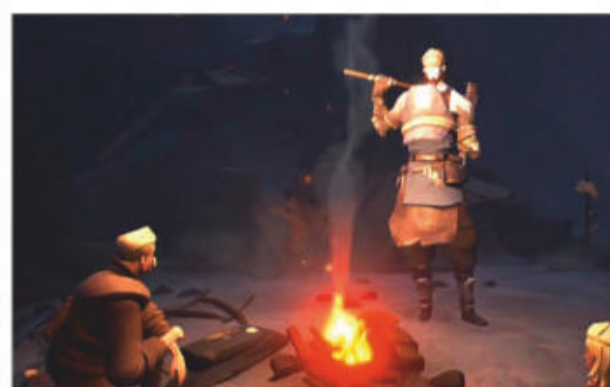
JOURNEY

The 'Journey' menu, however, provides map information, and reflects the likes of *Skyrim*.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Ashen's slant on *Souls* isn't revolutionary, but is a wonderful example of the familiar formula executed well.

85



WAKE UP, SHEEPL

Cheat on your partner and pay the price in **CATHERINE CLASSIC**'s offbeat mix of puzzle game and life sim. *By Samuel Roberts*

What next, *Persona 5* on PC? It's hard not to believe that'll happen someday soon, now that I have got *Catherine* in my Steam library. It's been an exciting few years for previously console-only cult classics coming to PC, especially from the likes of SEGA. *Catherine* is a real oddity: part-relationship and life simulator, and part-pretty good block-climbing puzzle game.

What's appealing is its unusual subject matter. You're Vincent, a 30-something in a long-term relationship with Katherine, who wants to settle down, and for Vincent to find a better-paying job. Vincent, though, wakes up next to another girl called Catherine. After cheating, he begins to experience nightmares where he's in his underpants, climbing towers of collapsing blocks. The men who fall to their deaths in this hellscape are dying in real life.

The main part of the game is climbing and pushing the blocks in order to ascend these towers, dealing with occasional modifiers like slippery blocks made of ice, or blocks that are traps. It's about figuring out your next few moves in advance: building a staircase to reach the next rung of the column, or pushing out a few base blocks to make the entire tower drop down by one.

At the end of each set of levels, a kind of boss creature appears, manifesting as one of Vincent's worries: a giant screaming demonic baby, for example, or a giant evil butt (seriously). It can be incredibly tricky, and it's possible to push enough blocks away to make it impossible to reach the exit at the top. Luckily, there's a rewind function to take back your last few moves, and even on normal mode, checkpoints and retries are fairly generous.

The life sim element of the game breaks up these intense puzzles. Before Vincent sleeps, he hangs out with his friends in a bar. Here he interacts with his pals, some of whom admonish him for his repeated

cheating, as well as the interesting patrons of the bar who all have their own stories. You'll meet people in this bar who'll then appear in your dreams as sheep, which is kind of eerie – they've cheated too, and they are now paying the price.

I like *Catherine* as a puzzle game, but I don't love it. The towers are repetitive to climb, and a couple of the modifiers are really annoying: being knocked off a specific

block by a boss's super ability, for example, or encountering enemies who can knock you down as well.

I actually think *Catherine* is slightly stronger as a life sim, where you can pore over Vincent's situation, and make decisions based on what you think is right or wrong. You can text back both Katherine and Catherine, and whatever you choose to put in the text from a number of predetermined options will push a

**It's about
figuring out
your next few
moves in
advance**

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
2011 console puzzle/
life sim game about the
price of cheating.

EXPECT TO PAY
£15

DEVELOPER
Atlus

PUBLISHER
SEGA

REVIEWED ON
Core i5-8600K, GTX
1080 Ti, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Local

LINK
www.catherine.thegame.com

good or evil slider a certain way. If you want Vincent to cheat, go for it. If you want to be faithful to Katherine and make up for your mistakes, you can do that too.

CHEAT CODE

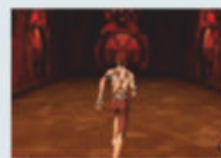
You don't shape the story, really – mostly just the ending – but the subject matter is so unusual that just being asked these things by a game is refreshing. Its portrayal has some problems. By never remembering the times he sleeps with Catherine, he doesn't really have to take responsibility for it. Likewise, Katherine's depiction in the game frames commitment as being this incredibly scary thing that's being inflicted on Vincent, a man who's pathetically helpless when it comes to making his own decisions.

Catherine, meanwhile, represents the opposite of that – she's interested in Vincent and designed to be the object of his lust, allowing him to throw aside the things he's afraid of and cheat. Both women are depicted as controlling figures in his life and not much more. While the game definitely has interesting things to say about adult relationships, this is also an excuse to have an anime lady send you naughty pictures, or for gratuitous camera angles. It can be insightful, but heavy on fan service.

It's such a strange combination, to have these puzzles and life sim elements awkwardly welded together, but it just about works. *Catherine* is a memorable experience, and while my opinion of its themes changes the older I get, I still find being asked questions like, 'Who's responsible when someone cheats?' by a game exciting. The fact it's now on PC, in a well-priced edition like this, is a treat. ■

PERSONA SHOPPER

Other Atlus games that should come to PC



SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI 3: NOCTURNE
I loved this moody JRPG, which is like a more grown-up *Pokémon*, featuring Dante from *DMC* for some reason.



PERSONA 4
The *Persona* games blend RPGs and life sims together in a way that's really interesting – and this game's small town setting is a neat backdrop.



PERSONA 5
The latest entry in the series is considered its best yet, and Phil spent over 100 hours binging it on his couch to deal with mag deadlines.

PC GAMER VERDICT

An odd hybrid of life simulator and puzzle game where both flawed halves somehow work well together.

73



Oh Vincent, just be single for a while and sort yourself out.



Hanging out with Vincent's pals is the best part of the game.

Orlando

Haha, the timing's too good. Still, I can't believe you cheated...

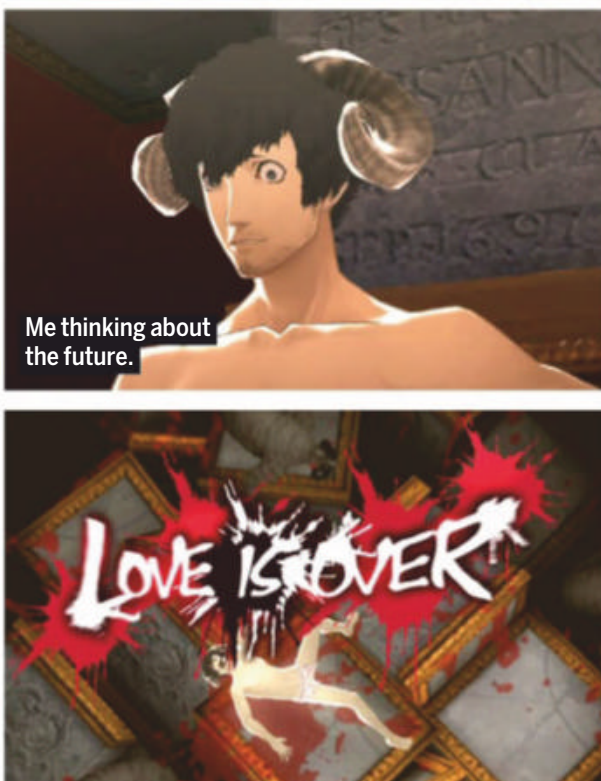


Cheating lands you in this cheery place.

Sheep

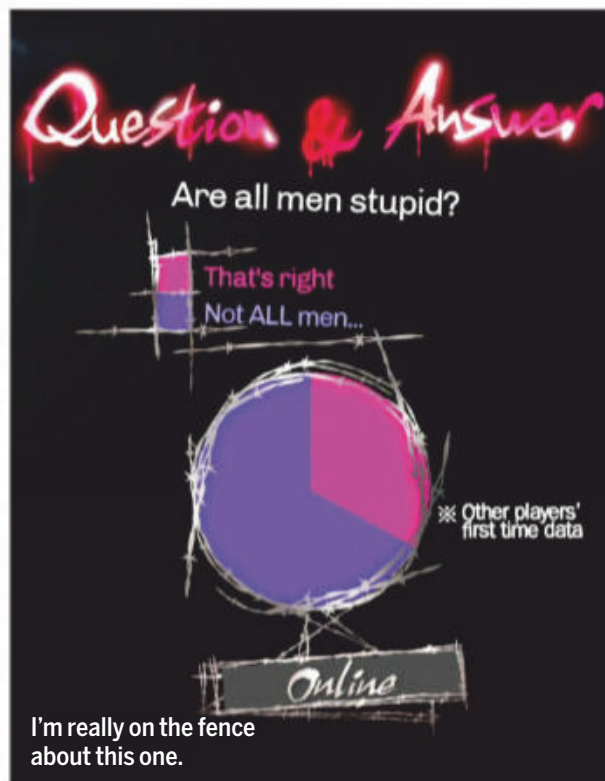
And wherever women end, foolish men are born...

Remove Enemies



Me thinking about the future.

LOVE IS OVER



Question & Answer

Are all men stupid?

That's right
Not ALL men...

※ Other players' first time data

Online

I'm really on the fence about this one.

DEAD END

DAYZ is a zombie survival game that's boring, clunky, and some of the most exciting multiplayer on PC. *By Andy Kelly*

December, 2013. Barack Obama is in the White House. Wrecking Ball by Miley Cyrus is topping the charts. The Harlem Shake is taking the internet by storm. And *DayZ*, a zombie-themed survival game, hits Steam Early Access. Part-survival sandbox, part-social experiment, the game throws 64 players into a bleak zombie apocalypse, sits back and lets them make their own fun.

Five years later and *DayZ*, having gone through an extended Early Access period, is finally out. And, well, nothing much has changed. There's something comforting about the fact that *DayZ* is still *DayZ*, with its clunky controls, buggy zombies and commitment to making surviving as hard as possible. It's kinda absurd that, in a 1.0 release, there are still problems that have been stubbornly lingering since the alpha days. But honestly, I wasn't expecting much else. For better or worse, it's the game I remember.

You still have to run for miles to meet up with friends. Zombies still get stuck in walls or just fail to notice you at all. You can scour an entire town for supplies, only to find one dirty jacket, a tin opener and no tins. And the chances that you'll be killed by an unseen sniper, usually seconds after you finally find something good, is always high. At least the ladders have been sorted. Veteran players will remember the agony of climbing a ladder and ending up inexplicably dead at the bottom of it.

If this all sounds a bit miserable, it is. Minute to minute, this is about as

gruelling as survival games get. You have an ever-dwindling parade of meters to manage – thirst, hunger, temperature and so on – and the general scarcity of items can make staying alive an ordeal. There's

You have an ever-dwindling parade of meters to manage

nothing more disheartening than trekking for miles to a town, only to see all the doors lying open: a surefire sign that someone has already looted the place.

But this does complement the hopeless, melancholy atmosphere of the game. The Soviet map, Chernarus, is dripping in misery. You get the feeling that even before the zombies arrived, this would've been an unpleasant place to get lost in. But there's a quiet beauty to be found out there, too, particularly in the rolling farmland, dense forests and sleepy rural towns. It's a fantastic setting, and a welcome change from the more familiar Western post-apocalypses that usually feature in these games.

The largest concentration of players tends to be around cities and military bases – where the best loot is often found – meaning you can travel in the wilds pretty much undisturbed. When I play *DayZ*, I'm constantly on

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A hardcore survival game, with zombies.

EXPECT TO PAY
£34

DEVELOPER
Bohemia Interactive

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Core i5-6600K, GTX 1080, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
1-64 players

LINK
www.dayz.com

the move, travelling between towns, landmarks and other points of interest, grabbing whatever I can find, avoiding trouble if I can. But that means a *lot* of uneventful running. There are vehicles, but they're often missing parts or fuel, and locating them can be a real chore for a solo player.

CHANGING GEAR

The sandbox nature of the game means that getting 'geared up' will be most players' main goal: finding a gun, ammo, bandages, food, drink and maybe a nice helmet or something. But the more you hoard, the more nerve-racking the game becomes, because you know that you're just one trigger-happy survivor or troll away from losing it all. I actually love this, because it makes death mean something. When you die you're unceremoniously dumped back to a random starting location with no gear, and knowing this makes every decision, especially with other players around, loaded with danger.

The real thrill of *DayZ*, and the reason I've played both the mod and the standalone version for hundreds of hours each, is in the feeling you get when you inevitably bump into another survivor. Even now my heart pounds when I'm exploring a town or wandering in the wilderness and I see another player ahead. Sometimes, but not that often these days, they might wave you down for a chat and some beans. Or they might warn you about a group of bandits (*DayZ* slang for player killers) in the next town.

But they'll probably just shoot you on sight. There are a lot of reasons for this. They might just enjoy killing people. They might want your loot. Or, and this happened to me, the game has turned them into a horrible person. See, I used to be friendly. I'd approach people, wave, say hello. I'd give them advice or ask if they needed a hand. But after several instances of people pretending to be friendly then stabbing me in the back (literally), or luring me into an

TIMELINE A brief history of DayZ

JANUARY 21, 2012
Dean Hall releases his *Arma 2* mod, *DayZ*.

APRIL 18, 2012
DayZ enters alpha phase, and takes the world by storm.

MAY 15, 2012
Hall tells PC Gamer that a standalone version of *DayZ* is in the works.

AUGUST 7, 2012
Bohemia announces the standalone game.

DECEMBER 16, 2013
DayZ hits Early Access on Steam and will stay there for a while.

DECEMBER 13, 2018
DayZ reaches version 1.0 and leaves Early Access.

Get this close to a zombie and you'll probably die.



The indignity of having no gear as a new player.



Not even churches are safe.



Now that's an intimidating balaclava.



You never know if a building contains loot or not.



Making friends with another survivor.



Did I activate big head mode?



Chernarus can be really atmospheric at times.



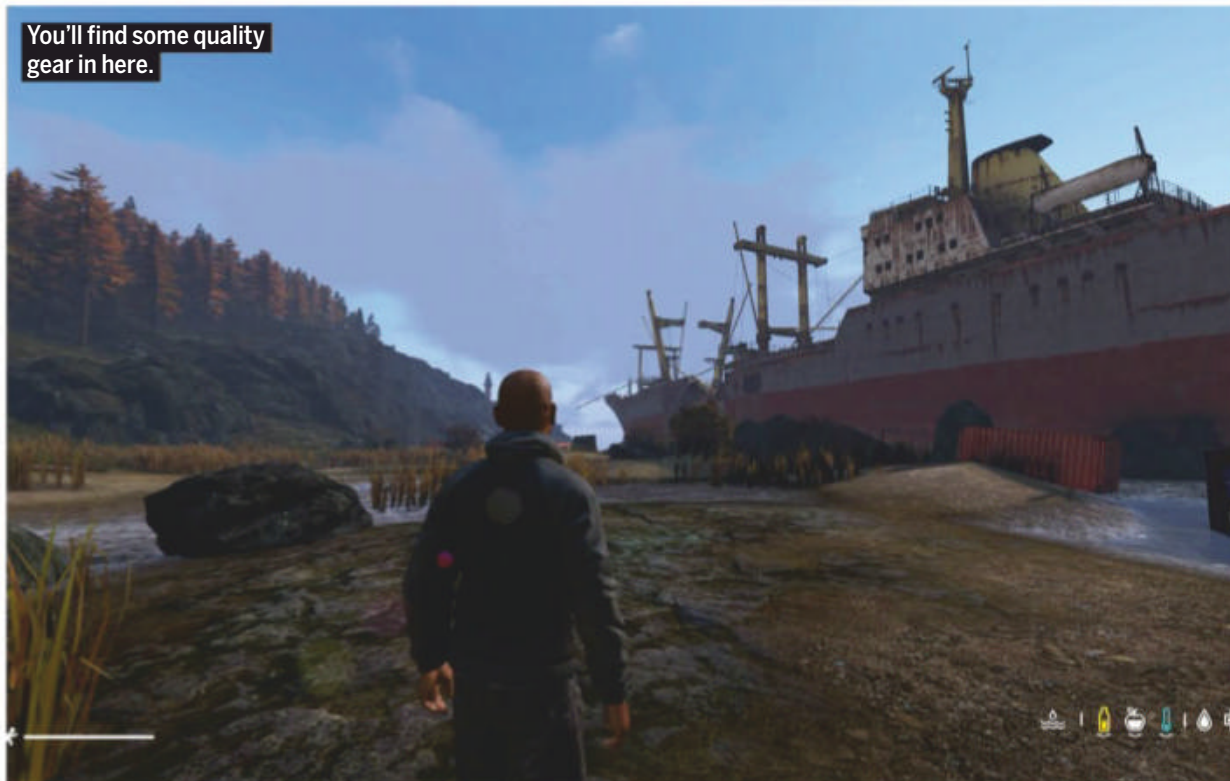
Ladders are no longer deadly.



Another empty house, looted by other players.



You'll find some quality gear in here.



ambush, I've become wary of other survivors to the point of paranoia.

That's brilliant, though. It's what makes *DayZ* such a fascinating multiplayer game, and far more interesting to me than something like *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds*. In games like that, your only interaction with people is, ultimately, shooting them. But in *DayZ*, every encounter with another player is an opportunity for a story. Even if you get robbed or handcuffed or humiliated, it'll be something you remember.

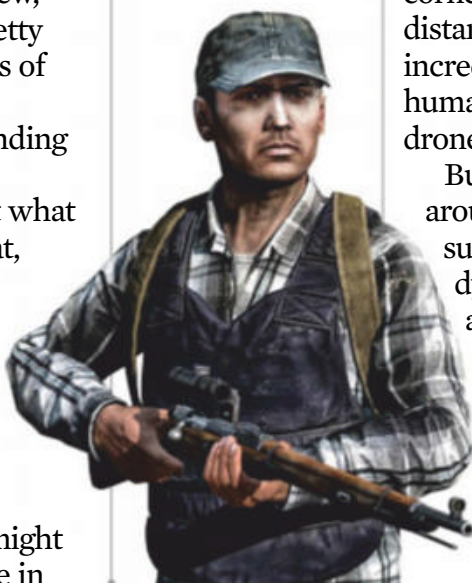
Incidentally, make sure you play with a mic. Not responding vocally when someone says hello, or orders you to do something at gunpoint, will likely just get you killed.

I haven't really talked about the zombies yet, because they're the least exciting thing in the game. Which is, perhaps, a little odd in a game about a zombie apocalypse. When they aren't stuck in the scenery they run dumbly at you, and sometimes they phase in and out of existence like your internet connection can't keep up with them. Then when it comes to actually shooting or smacking one with a melee weapon, there's no sense of physicality at all.

Fighting a zombie feels like swatting at a hologram. The combat really is abysmal, and there's no sense of challenge or satisfaction attached to it. They're better than they were in the early days of the standalone, but only just. The result of this is that, rather than something to be feared, the undead are just annoying. There was a point in the mod when the zombies didn't work at all, and I enjoyed that more because there was nothing getting in the way of the real heart of the game: the interactions between players.

BORED STIFF

DayZ is a difficult game to review, because a lot of the time it's pretty boring. There are long stretches of nothing; of rambling across seemingly endless fields, not finding anything in towns, never encountering another soul. But what keeps you going is knowing that, around the next corner, something incredibly exciting might happen. A firefight with a rival group of survivors in a ruined city. A knife-edge standoff with a gun-toting rival. Someone who hasn't seen you, meaning you might be able to sneak up, stick an axe in



OLD WORLD BLUES *Places to visit in Chernarus*



INTERNATIONAL HOTEL

A half-destroyed hotel located in the city of Chernogorsk, with the charred remains of a plane nearby. The infection must've spread to its passengers while it was in the air.



GREEN MOUNTAIN

Northeast of the village of Zelenogorsk, Green Mountain can be seen for miles around. On it you'll find a massive radio tower and a military base filled with loot.



CARGO SHIP

On the northeastern shoreline of Chernarus, you'll find this wrecked ship. And an opening in the hull lets you access its interior and the valuable loot within.



ELEKTROZAVODSK

This city is one of the most populated areas in Chernarus, popular with survivors for its abundance of loot, ambush spots and hiding places. Newcomers should stay away.

their back, and steal that nice jacket they're wearing.

These snatches of drama are fleeting, but in the right moment there are few games as exciting as *DayZ*. And, similar to *EVE Online*, knowing that everything (except the zombies) is player-driven makes it feel extra special. If you get tricked and robbed by a group of bandits, it wasn't some event scripted by a developer: it was dreamed up by a real, thinking human, and that really adds to the experience. In one combat encounter – my backpack stuffed with hard-earned supplies, my friend lying bleeding in the corner, two assailants hidden in the distance – the exhilaration was incredible. These were intelligent humans that I was facing, not AI drones I could easily outsmart.

But then it was back to running around the fields, scavenging for supplies, failing to find any, then dying and restarting – again and again. *DayZ* comes into its own when you get a foothold, managing to locate enough supplies and weapons to defend yourself and stay alive. But getting to that point is absolutely gruelling sometimes, and that's where a

lot of people will bounce off it. It's a game where you have to work hard to achieve anything, and even then it can be immediately snatched away from you if you make one stupid mistake, or a player decides they want to shoot you.

HIT AND MISS

Occasionally, *DayZ* is one of the best multiplayer games on PC. But a lot of the

time it's a slow, dull, frustrating, and meandering mess of bugs, broken zombie AI and weightless combat. So I don't know what to think, really. Some of the stories this game has created will stick with me forever, and that's something to be celebrated. But it's also unforgiving, messy and doesn't have much respect for your time. If you want a social survival experience that doesn't pull any punches, set in an evocative and atmospheric world, then *DayZ* might be worth looking at. But if you're after a polished game that always does what it's supposed to, you're in for a disappointment. ■

Fighting a zombie feels like swatting at a hologram

PC GAMER VERDICT

DayZ has the power to create incredible stories, but the weightless combat and buggy zombies let it down.

69

PILOT EPISODE

Flying high since '95, **ACE COMBAT 7: SKIES UNKNOWN** presents a spruced-up goose. *By Phil Iwaniuk*

Aerial combat games can be split down the middle, more or less, according to which half of the '90s they hark back to. Is it an ode to *After Burner*, all effortless loops and rolls? Or is it the kind of rigorous flight sim that flew so high in the decade's latter half, almost invariably taking its name from a plane (see *Falcon 4.0*, *B-17 Flying Fortress*, et al), where even correctly retracting your landing gear is a real achievement.

You don't need me to tell you that *Ace Combat 7* is the former. You can see by the screenshots, by the very name, that this is about getting you up in the air and feeling like Maverick ASAP, laws of physics be damned. It's the latest in a 23-year-old franchise devoted to just that, no less. And on those terms, it's a roaring success.

As with its predecessors, there are two different flight models available here, one professing to offer a simplified handling experience while the other offers a deeper simulation. In truth, neither one is particularly taxing and the most discernible difference between them seems to be increased control of yaw and pitch in simulation mode. It's *Need for Speed* handling in the air then, essentially, and there's nothing inherently wrong with that. After an hour or so of chucking a fighter jet about with abandon, though, you do feel a desire to test your flight skills further than either model truly allows.

No, instead that challenge must be gleaned from *Ace Combat 7*'s missions. They start off pedestrian, but kick into gear after three or four

levels to reveal an unhinged campaign. What begins as 15 minutes of shooting at radar towers and the odd enemy fighter quickly descends into boss fights against impossible constructions, battles with drone

swarms and navigational setpieces straight from a Universal Studios ride. The demands of *Ace Combat 7*'s campaign are matched perfectly with its accessible approach to flight simulation, throwing

improbable machines and scenarios at you simply because it can.

Make it back to base after one of these delirious encounters and you'll earn some currency to spend on new weapons, plane upgrades, and entirely new aircraft via a huge and elaborate tech tree. The improvements to manoeuvrability are subtle when you upgrade a plane, but weapon additions can make you much more effective in certain missions – plus each new jet speaks to the five-year-old in all of us who finds them impossibly, unspeakably cool. *Ace Combat* knows this very well, you suspect, as it lingers on shots of them in selection screens before your sortie.

Each new jet speaks to the five-year-old in all of us

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Accessible dogfighting and baffling cutscenes, in that order.

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Bandai Namco Studios

PUBLISHER
Bandai Namco Entertainment

REVIEWED ON
Core i5 6500, GTX 1070, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Up to eight players

LINK
www.bandai-namcoent.com/games/ace-combat-7

But is there enough variety? It seems ungrateful to even ask when you've just concluded a mission that requires you to navigate collapsing skyscrapers, but no, perhaps there isn't. Despite all the bluster, it's hard to shake the fatigue that comes with your 100th dogfight or ground attack. The settings change around, and sometimes the environment itself poses a hazard, but in the simplest terms the gameplay loop doesn't evolve beyond aim, lock and fire. That's as much a genre problem as anything *Ace Combat 7* does wrong in particular, and if you're reading this review you've likely already made your peace with arcade flight simulator eccentricities. Still, that frustration exists.

TURBULENCE

There are more obvious negatives, though, like the unengaging cutscenes between missions, which hand on heart I really did try to follow, but quickly exceeded my threshold for narrative codswallop to the point where the words just didn't register. Previous *Ace Combat* instalments made it their 'thing' to bark absurd dialogue at you until it became endearing. Some of that remains here, but *Ace Combat 7* appears to want to be taken seriously for large chunks of time, and it doesn't have the characterisation – scratch that, enough of a semblance of sense – to really earn it.

I'll not dwell on what's ultimately a subjective aspect of the game, though, but will instead sing *Ace Combat 7*'s praises for looking great without overly taxing your PC (there's even a downsampling option!), but mostly for keeping the early '90s arcade flight sim alive, prettier and weirder than ever. ■

COME FLY WITH ME

Navigating Ace Combat 7's aircraft tree



F-4E
Where it all begins. It's capable and nippy, but those stats... yeesh.



SU-30M2
A formidable Russian Air Force classic, all undulating lines and missiles.



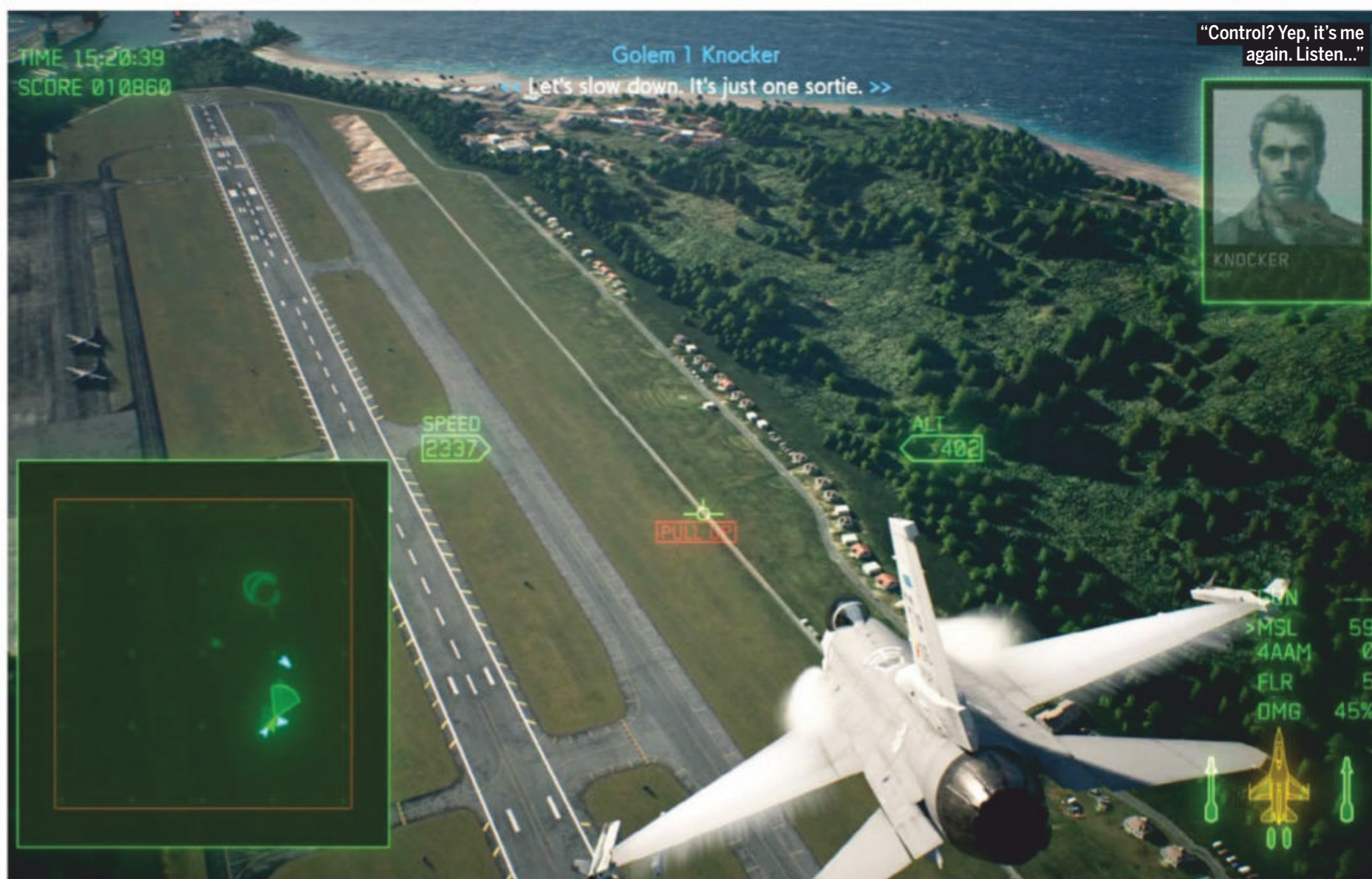
F-22A
The priciest fighter, and with reason: these are \$150m per unit IRL.

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Uncomplicated but gratifying flying, in scenarios of increasing silliness and likeability. Tedious story, though.

75



OGRE THE HILL

ONIMUSHA: WARLORDS is a fun relic, if you can stomach how old it feels. *By Samuel Roberts*

Onimusha is a series that burned brief and bright for Capcom. It began in 2001 and was pretty much over by 2006, encompassing four main entries and two spin-offs. The original isn't the series peak, but it's a fun relic of the era of survival horror games that was popularised by *Resident Evil*. I would only play this re-release in 2019 if you're an old fan, or curious about this generation of games that never had much of a presence of PC.

Onimusha is an offbeat series, a mix between historical epic and fantasy that sadly didn't survive the leap to the HD era like *Resident Evil* and *Devil May Cry* did. While the second game – with its innovative trading system, multiple playable characters and branching storyline – is the series' only masterpiece, the first game is still a fun curio from the *Resident Evil* lineage of fixed-camera action games. You play Samanosuke Akechi, a warrior who ventures to save Princess Yuki from Nobunaga and his army of demons. After being owned by the first big monster he encounters, he's revived by a kindly collective of ogres with a gauntlet that can absorb the souls of demons.

It won't be much of a surprise to anyone to learn that this 2001 hack-and-slash game has dated in so many ways. Even next to Capcom's *Devil May Cry* from the same year, which featured 3D backgrounds, a more active camera and faster combat, *Onimusha* feels retrograde.

You mostly spend the game wandering through tightly-wound corridors full of demonic enemies and key-based puzzles. Calling it *Resident Evil* with swords, which is pretty much how the media described it at the time, isn't far off – it even has healing herbs, and environments that are so complicated to navigate that it's implausible humans ever existed there.

The combat is still nice and crunchy, though. Sword fights with enemies are paced like considered duels compared to *DMC*'s acrobatic flurries, and you really feel it when the blade connects with an opponent. Enemies spend more time circling you than windmilling, and a well-timed sword press will land an instant counter kill. The fixed camera angles do suck, though: if you're fighting an enemy and they suddenly vanish off-screen, it's pretty annoying. Likewise, being hit by an enemy you can't even see is something modern games have pretty much eliminated.

It doesn't really look any smoother than I remember it on PS2

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A 2001 demon-fighting hack-and-slash game, brought to PC with slightly better controls and widescreen support.

EXPECT TO PAY
£16

DEVELOPER
Capcom

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Core i5-3570K, GTX 970
16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
www.onimusha2001.com

The voice acting is still terrible, too – what could be a horror-tinged and creepy story is undermined by campy enemies and bad lip-syncing, both products of their time. This stuff might be annoying to acclimatise to if you never played these kinds of games about 20 years ago, but you'll have to stomach it if you're desperate to pick up *Onimusha* on PC.

The additional options in this PC version are super limited. You can remap the controls and change the resolution, but that's it. The main issue with this version is some noticeable screen tearing, particularly during cutscenes. The framerate counter kept a steady 60fps throughout my playthrough, but to my eye it doesn't really look any smoother than I remember it on PS2. The blurry low-res backgrounds really date the game, too.

CULT CLASSIC?

It's also not a particularly long game at about five or six hours – the asking price of £16 isn't unreasonable, but I would probably have preferred to have three or four of the original games in one package for a higher price, like the *Devil May Cry* collection. Nonetheless, for completists, it's a start.

Much as I complain about *Onimusha* feeling old, I am absolutely the target audience for this re-release and I had a lot of fun treating this playthrough like a speedrun, given that I finished the game five or six times on PS2. I'd struggle to recommend it to anyone below the age of 30 who grew up with prettier and more refined third-person action games, but if you were there at the time, *Onimusha* remains an important part of a golden era for Capcom during the early '00s. ■

WHAT COMES NEXT? *The rest of the Onimusha series*



ONIMUSHA 2: SAMURAI'S DESTINY
Trade with the allies of your choice and unlock different storylines in this high point for the series.



ONIMUSHA 3: DEMON SIEGE
Starring Jean Reno, this offbeat sequel came to PC but was removed from Steam last year.

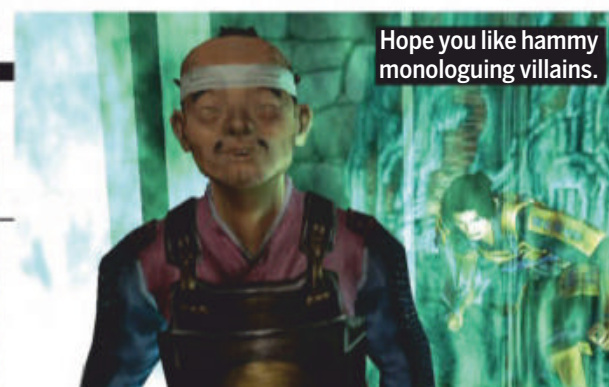


ONIMUSHA: DAWN OF DREAMS
Released in the dying days of the PS2, I felt like this first fully 3D entry was mostly ignored, ending the series.

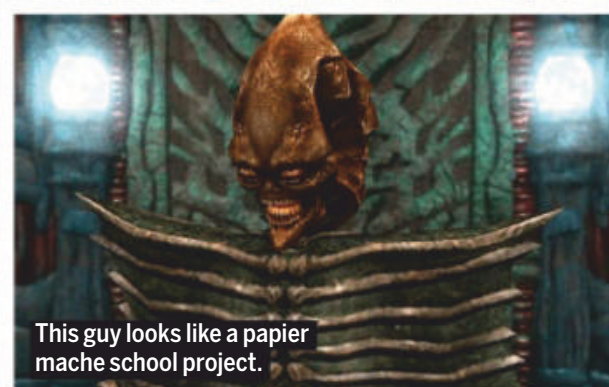
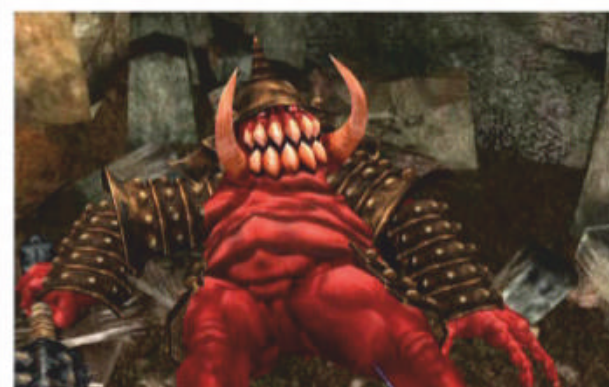
PC GAMER VERDICT

A fun relic of the early PlayStation 2 days that I still like a lot, but is slightly too dated for most players to enjoy.

68



Hope you like hammy monologuing villains.



This guy looks like a papier mache school project.



The dialogue is awful, and delivered poorly.

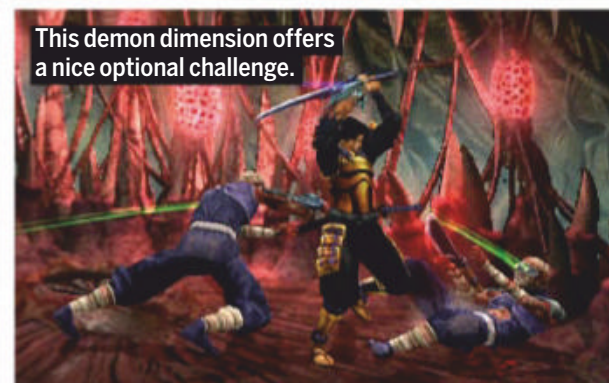


I knew you would come!
You are so impressive for a mere human!

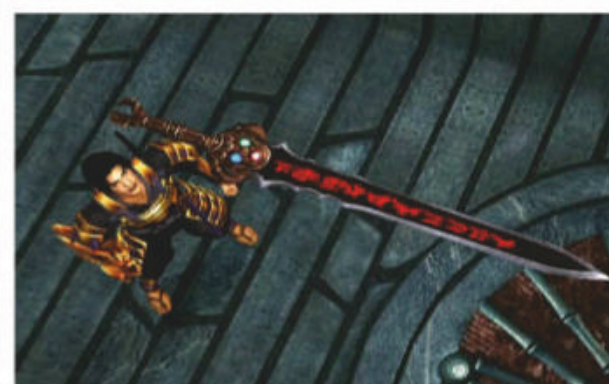


You play part of the game as the non-supernatural Kaede.

You follow them through the other way.



This demon dimension offers a nice optional challenge.



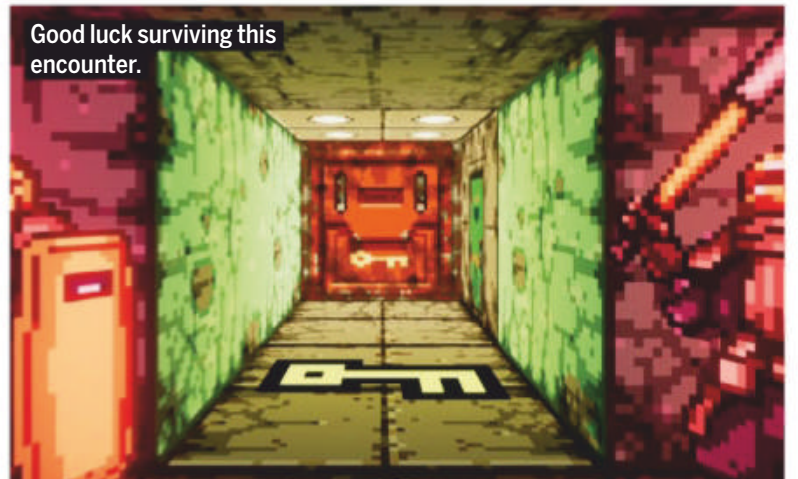
Gridlock



The sprites can be a little difficult to decipher.



Good luck surviving this encounter.



STEP TO IT

Nutting cyberpunks and making cyber-worlds in dungeon crawler **GRIDLOCK**. By Tom Sykes

If you're jonesing for a new *System Shock*, or a new grid-based dungeon crawler in the vein of *Legend of Grimrock*, here's a jam game that will scratch both those itches – for a while at least. *Gridlock* takes place in a cyberpunk city, after wrong-'uns have dognapped your pet, leaving you to infiltrate their lair, batter everyone and rescue your pooch. That doesn't actually happen, I'm sorry to reveal, as the developers only found time to include one level.

Gridlock is a crawl that feels just lovely to control, with a rewarding sense of heft to the strictly grid-locked movement. Combat, too, feels impactful, even if it is fairly basic, lacking any verbs other than 'bash', an interaction you achieve by rubbing up against your enemies, roguelike style.

It helps that this is a particularly attractive game, its pixel art sprites and textures enhanced with some sophisticated lighting effects. This is a world that looks satisfyingly chunky and gritty, and rather a lot like *System Shock's*, but with added bursts of blinding neon to cloud your retinas. I'd love to explore more of this city, which is why it's so disappointing that the game cuts out abruptly, with a simple text message informing the player that there is no more.

This is a world that looks satisfyingly chunky and gritty

Okay, so that's not *strictly* accurate – there is more to *Gridlock*. Much more. An endless amount, theoretically. Once you've run through the level, you can hop into an editor to explore unfinished stages, and even create some of your own.

I get the feeling that the developers spent most of their week-long development time on the level editor, and little on the actual game, and if so, I'm tempted to say it was the right decision. It's a wonderfully robust tool that allows you to muck about with any of the included map files, and to build your own even as you're wandering around.

Not a fan of collecting keys, and then laboriously hoofing it back to a door to open it? Simply crack open the level editor and delete a couple of obstructing walls. Or even enemies,

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A first-person dungeon crawler with a sophisticated level editor. And only one level.

EXPECT TO PAY

Nothing

DEVELOPER

David Rosen, Aubrey Serr, Anton Riehl

PUBLISHER

In-house

REVIEWED ON

AMD A4-6300, 6GB RAM, GeForce GT 610

MULTIPLAYER

None

LINK

www.bit.ly/GridlockJam

should they be foolish enough to get in your way. There's no clear delineation between the 'game' and 'editor' parts of *Gridlock* – that means you can open it up at any time to adjust the world.

HACK IT

The moment I did so was a moment of minor revelation. Not only is the editor extremely easy to use, but it's integrated in a refreshingly holistic way. Are you editing the game, or hacking it? Rename a few of the windows, and rework the environment, and suddenly the editor is a cheat menu – or a central mechanic that an entire hacking game might be built around.

A few more authored levels would have gone down a treat, as would more complex battles that make use of, say, ranged weapons or abilities. It's a bit placeholder but this is a fascinating jam game, and a rock-solid foundation for something better to build upon. ■

PC GAMER

VERDICT

The end will sneak up on you sooner than you would like, but there's the basis for a great dungeon crawler here.

73

HIPPOCRATIC NOPE

Save and end lives in **FIXIN' TO DIE**. By Tom Sykes

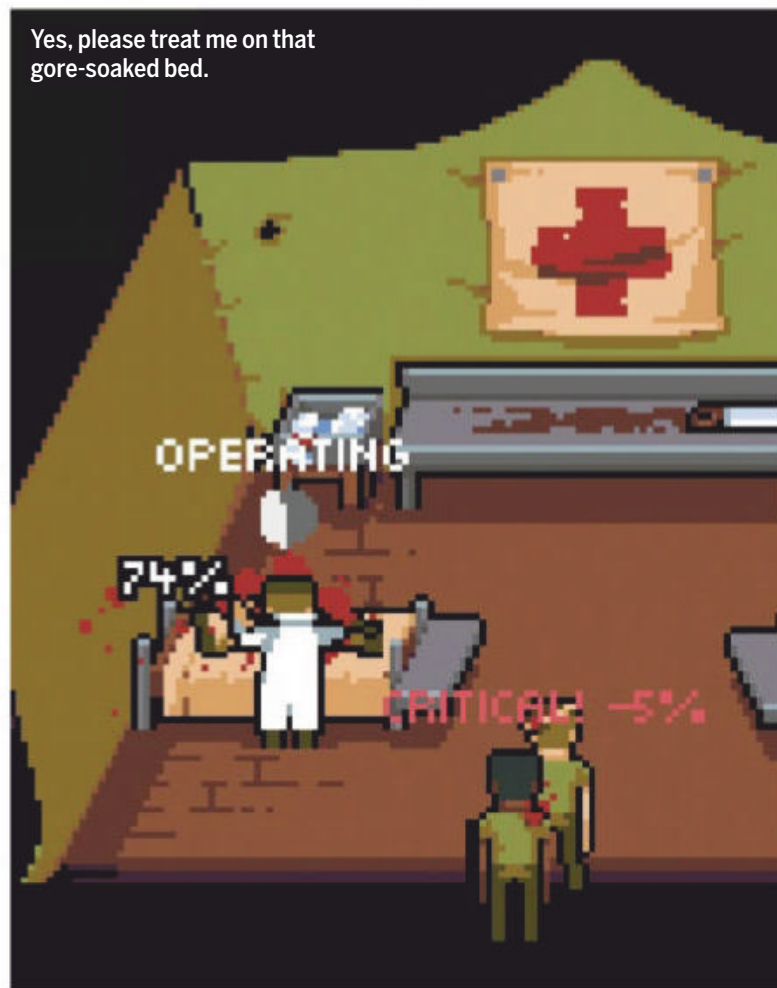
It's tough being a surgeon, doubly so if your operating table is a ramshackle tent in the middle of a warzone. I know this because I've just been saving lives (and violently ending them) in the rather bluntly titled *Fixin' To Die*. It's a hectic doctoring sim that presents your harried little surgeon dude with a procession of wounded soldiers, each with grievous injuries that will kill them if they're not treated in time.

As with NHS hospitals in the UK, there are only so many beds – in this case just two – so in each stage there will be a queue of patients waiting desperately for the healing touch of your, um, hacksaw. You begin the caring process by heaving a patient onto your shoulder and carrying them over to an available sickbed, where their condition will immediately stabilise.

Once ensconced in a bed, their survival odds will become known to you – be it an inspiring 88%, or a worrying 12% chance that your surgery attempts will end in success. Rather than wasting precious hacksaw time on a dead man – and thus making everyone in the queue sicker – you can choose to sacrifice the, frankly doomed, patient instead, shoving their body into a big disposal bin. The downside of this horrific action is that you might not meet your quota, but on the plus side you will free up a bed – and can even use their blood to improve another patient's odds.

It's quite tasteless, but the animation and sound effects are terrifically, ludicrously over-the-top. And beneath all that, this is a novel management title that builds on games like *Diner Dash*, with a hacksaw and geysers of blood. ■

71



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Nothing

DEVELOPER
SeaDads

LINK
www.bit.ly/fixintodie

INTERGALACTIC

Word up with **GALACTIC CENTER FOR ETYMOLOGICAL RESEARCH**. By Tom Sykes

It was a good five minutes before I saw through the sci-fi veneer of *Galactic Center for Etymological Research*, and I realised it was actually a relatively simple word game. This is, after all, a game by Stephen Lavelle, the creator of fiendish meat-based puzzler *Stephen's Sausage Roll*. I wasn't expecting its systems to feel so familiarly newspaperly. At its core it's the sort of puzzler you'd find in your daily paper's games section, next to the sudoku.

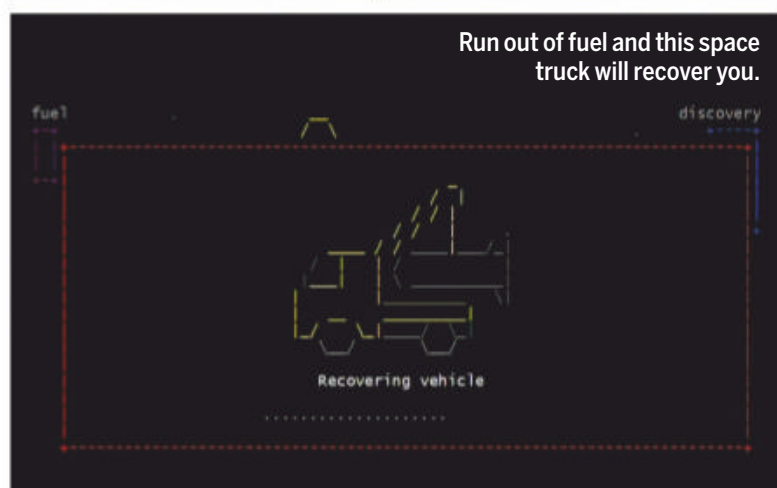
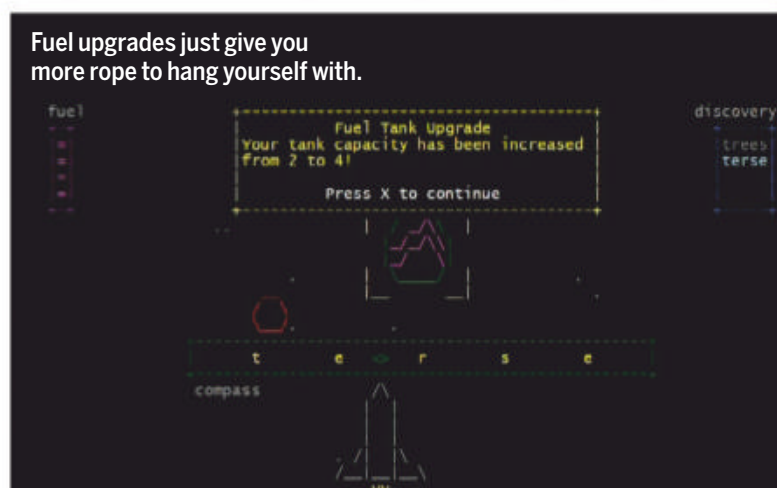
While *Galactic Center* is nominally a game of space exploration, where you'll travel from sector to sector, charting planets and managing your fuel reserves, what you're *really* doing is shuffling letters around to conjure up new words. The 'fuel' thing is just a turn limit, throwing up a cute

failure message after a certain number of wasted moves.

You begin on the planet Star, but by swapping the S and T around, you discover the planet Tsar. And so on and so on, until you've located every possible planet in a solar system, and you're warped to an even more challenging lexicographical environment. While *Galactic Center* starts simply, offering basic words that are easy to contort into new ones, it balloons in complexity. Even the addition of an extra letter is a big step up in difficulty.

A solid puzzle game is what this is, artfully made and expertly paced, and with an appealing space exploration layer drizzled over the top. It's not the next great puzzler, but it will make your brain happy for an afternoon or two. ■

75



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Nothing

DEVELOPER
Stephen Lavelle

LINK
www.bit.ly/spellspace

THEY'RE BACK

OLD GAMES REVISITED by Chris Thursten



Please, no king shaming.



Deep Roads, take me home.



NOT FADE AWAY

Loving **DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS** night and day

Reader, it's time. After seven-and-a-bit years spent scribbling for PC Gamer, I'm hauling myself over the fence into game development. This is my last They're Back, and the last thing I'll contribute to the magazine for the foreseeable.

I intend to depart these pages in the manner I came in: banging on about BioWare. Given that the studio's next thing, *Anthem*, is nearly upon us, I want to look back ten years (!) to the last time Canada's finest purveyors of kissing games launched a new universe.

Dragon Age: Origins marked the return of classic CRPGs before it became a trend. Where those games strove to resurrect the era of *Baldur's Gate* and *Planescape* as-was, however, *Dragon Age* wrestled with updating the formula and making it palatable to a late-'00s audience. It took BioWare the better part of a decade to pull it all together, and you can see the benefit of that effort not just in the colossal amount of worldbuilding that *Origins* involves

but that every conversation is fully voiced, every key moment illustrated – albeit clunkily – with a cutscene.

EA had absolutely no idea what to do with it, giving this fantasy epic a tacky tribal tattoo, hoping people would mistake it for *God of War*, and flinging it out the door. And yet *Origins* was as tremendous success, because it deserved to be – it was a labour of love, and audiences respond to that, and moreover it was unusually generous about who it lets you become, befriend, and, because this is BioWare, bonk.

I suspect we're not going to get another new series like this out of BioWare

Its six origin stories are your entry point to a deep and well-conceived setting. It wears the influence of *Game of Thrones* openly before that was a thing and sustains the feeling of cracking

open a massive fantasy novel and watching a world spill out. Today those origin stories are the start of a thread that spans three games and multiple expansions. Looking back at the beginning of the series from *Dragon Age: Inquisition's* final expansion, *Trespasser*, gives me a kind of happy vertigo – and all of this is waiting for you! Your computer can

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A story-heavy tactical RPG with the feel of a well-loved fantasy paperback.

EXPECT TO PAY
£15

DEVELOPER
BioWare

PUBLISHER
EA

REVIEWED ON
Core i7-6700K,
GTX 980. 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Tumblr

LINK
[www.ea.com/
games/dragon-age](http://www.ea.com/games/dragon-age)

summon a massive interactive fantasy novel on demand! I find this very comforting, like knowing that if all else goes south I can always go home.

BYGONE AGE

And, remarkably, it's not over yet – as *Mass Effect* struggles to carve out a future for itself, its nerdier sibling is still powering along. I find this comforting, too, but for a different reason: I suspect we're not going to get another new series like this out of BioWare. The studio has simply changed too much under EA's auspices. There's nothing wrong with that, necessarily, but I can't imagine nu-BioWare taking ten years to figure out how wizards work. So let's make sure we enjoy the time when it did.

I'd recommend *Origins* to anybody with space in their hearts for a overlong, daft, good-natured, weepy, horny, off-brown adventure. I loved it when I started writing for PCG, and I still love it 94 issues later. 94, huh? That's an auspicious number. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Arguably the most BioWare BioWare game that was ever BioWared. That's a good thing, by the way.

94

DUN WELL

Honouring DISHONORED

I've written a fair bit about *Dishonored* over the years – it's one of my favourite games ever, and for three or four completely different reasons. I love the way it adopts the legacy of *Thief*, incorporating magic and parkour into the fantasy of being a cat burglar with a heart of gold.

I love it as a spiritual successor to *Dark Messiah*, the superlative orc-kicking sim. This is one of the most gratifying sandboxes ever rendered in first person, and it puts the minute-by-minute action of comparable immersive sims to shame. I love *Deus Ex*, but I'm not sure why that series is obsessed with simulating the experience of RoboCop realising that he's left his charger at home. *Dishonored* just lets you be magic Zorro. And why wouldn't you want to be magic Zorro?

But here's another reason why *Dishonored* is great, and the one I ultimately want to land on: it works as hard on worldbuilding as it does on system design. It draws from elements of 19th century art and history – don't call it steampunk or I'll set magic Zorro on you – and uses them to inform everything from architecture to costuming to politics. Games struggle to escape the pull of pastiche at the best of times, but *Dishonored* confidently asserts its own identity.

This originality is important because it opens up the game to new audiences – like *Dragon Age*, *Dishonored* is a game that supports a broad fandom because it feels like a world where different stories are possible. That is the noblest employment of the agency that immersive sims have always granted, and why this is the best one. ■

94

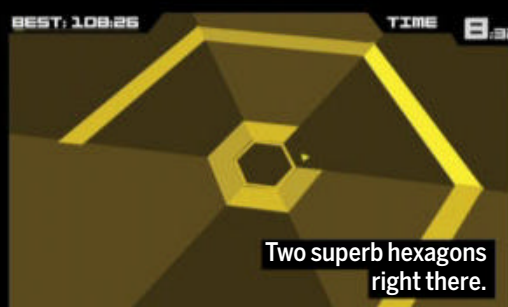


NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£8

DEVELOPER
Arkane Studios

PUBLISHER
Bethesda Softworks



SUPER HEXAGON

Super Hexagon is the king of the beeping games. It's a distillation of what makes bullet hell shooters, dance games and arcade racers fun, rendered in lines and using only two buttons (or one stick). You must guide a small triangle out of a shape, which is often a hexagon and sometimes a square. The walls close in! Point at the gaps. Do so to the beat. Touch the sides and fail. Start again. It's a direct interface between your lizard brain and the machine you control, but with excellent music and lights that make the monkey brain happy, too. That might sound a little reductive, but I mean it differently: in a medium that can do a lot, this feels fundamental. ■

94



DOTA 2

I suppose the games that I love the most are the ones that act as a toolkit for people to express themselves with: whether that's through fiction or action or finesse. *Dota 2* is special because it acts as a showcase of almost everything that is good and bad about people trying to co-operate with one another. Its sheer complexity relative to other comparable MOBAs isn't an obstacle to this: it accentuates it. It's hard! People can be mean! People can also exceed your expectations, pull victories out of the bag, come together when it counts. I appreciate that I gave *Dota 2* 92 when I re-reviewed it for PCGamer.com last year, but I'm doing a bit, so... ■

94



MASS EFFECT 3

I don't think any game series will ever hit as hard for me as *Mass Effect*, and this is a phenomenal conclusion. You heard me! It's a series of thrilling resolutions with one bighearted finale, unsurpassed as an act of bombastic interactive cinema. That it brought out the angry petition brigade, and that they have plagued games since, is a tragic shame. But *Mass Effect's* strength was always that it could play notes other than anger. What I'm saying is: the brave spaceships made me cry. ■

94



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HARDWARE

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104

GROUP TEST

Our expert promises a superior aural experience with these great gaming headsets.

If you're going to blast soundwaves into your eardrums, be sure to get the best.



108

BUYER'S GUIDE

Get the best PC parts for your build, no matter your budget.

GROUP TEST

GAMING HEADSETS

If you're looking for great sound, the best gaming headsets deliver unrivalled audio

By Phil Iwaniuk

What makes for the best gaming headset? Well, the

obvious answer is sound quality. Sure, you can make a pair of cans as feature-packed as possible, but if you don't have rumbling bass, pinpoint surround sound and decent noise-cancelling then you're never going to be the best.

I put all the following gaming headsets through their paces, with a wide variety of games, but also with music, videos and movies. If you're spending decent money on the best cans you can, you want to know they'll be good for more than just gaming (even if that's their primary role).



2



HOW WE TEST

We recently put more than 60 headset units through a \$50,000 testing setup to produce empirical data we could use to quantify our picks. We'll endeavour to make use of that setup again in future, but we haven't given up on testing by ear.

Each headset that we test we use daily for at least a week. We record a sample of our voice in Audacity and compare it to previous recordings from other models, then head to Discord to get some feedback from our friends on how we're sounding.

During that week, we aim to test each headset in a number of different game genres – shooters, battle royales and racing games make for good scenarios, since the former tends to test the low-end and reveal muddiness and distortion, while *PUBG* et al are great for positional audio tracking. Finally, good racing sims feature a very particular mix designed to help you hear brake lock-up and tyres losing traction.

It's not just about gaming, though: we wear the headsets while we work, listen to music, watch distracting videos and everything else that crops up while we're at our desk. Finally, we compare a few lossless music tracks by listening through our BeyerDynamic DT770s and then the test sample. The 770s have a really flat EQ that makes them great for music production and critical listening applications – hearing another headset immediately after them really brings EQ peaks and dips into focus.

Arctis 7

STEELSERIES £97

1 What I like best about the Arctis 7 is that you can easily forget it's a wireless model while you're using it. There's none of the muddiness or audio artefacts that have historically ruined the party for wireless headsets – it sounds just as good as the best wired models I've tested at this same £100 price point. The extraordinary battery life clocks in at over 20 hours out of the box, and after almost a year of heavy use that figure's hardly dropped off. You can keep playing while you charge, too, simply by connecting the headset to your PC with a USB cable.

The Arctis range's distinctive ski goggle headband is effective

at keeping the weight of the headset away from your head, and even after playing for hours I've never felt it digging in.

After a year of daily usage, the headband does slacken, which makes for a looser and slightly less comfortable fit, but the bands themselves are replaceable and sold for under £15 on the SteelSeries online store. A functional but slightly quiet and muffled mic is the only dent in its otherwise formidable armour.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ➕ Great battery life
- ➕ Comfortable 'ski goggle' headband
- ➖ Headband can slacken over time
- ➖ Average mic

SPECS WIRELESS: YES / **DRIVERS:** 40MM NEODYMIUM DRIVERS / **CONNECTIVITY:** WIRELESS VIA USB, 3.5MM WIRE / **FREQUENCY:** 20HZ-20,000HZ / **FEATURES:** RETRACTABLE NOISE CANCELLING MIC, DTS HEADPHONE:X, 7.1 SURROUND

Nari Ultimate

RAZER £150

2 No matter where you stand on the polarising debate of haptic feedback in games, I have to applaud its first proper execution in a gaming headset with the Razer Nari Ultimate. Showcasing the company's new HyperSense technology, this headset – which feels like you're wearing a pair of subwoofers on your head – is best experienced for yourself. Sure, there's an expensive point of entry, but it really is worth the money.

Since it features a wide gamut of haptic frequencies rather than just one static mode of vibration, the Nari Ultimate exhibits one of the most true-to-life rumble sensations I've ever experienced.

And because support for it isn't programmed at the software level, every game is compatible. But it's more than just haptics. In fact, the sound quality on the Nari Ultimate is a considerable improvement from Razer's phonic endeavours of the past. Unlike the bass-heavy Kraken series cans, this one adds a healthy balance of highs and mids to the mix as well. The wireless connection is a rock-solid one, and the overall comfort of the headset is excellent.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ➕ Haptic feedback works in its favour
- ➕ Balanced sound quality
- ➖ Limited wireless compatibility
- ➖ No support for noise-cancelling

SPECS WIRELESS: YES / **DRIVERS:** 50MM NEODYMIUM / **CONNECTIVITY:** USB WIRELESS, 3.5MM ANALOGUE / **FREQUENCY:** 20HZ-20,000HZ / **FEATURES:** UNIDIRECTIONAL MIC, LOFELT L5 HAPTIC DRIVERS, THX SPATIAL AUDIO

GROUP TEST



3

HyperX Cloud Alpha

KINGSTON **£70**

3

Bearing the fruits of HyperX Cloud's long legacy of excellence, the newest Cloud Alpha presents excellent sound and build quality with the essential features done well, and no feature-flab inflating the price. The stereo soundscape in this closed-back design is punchier in the low end than I'd usually go for, but the extra bass doesn't interfere with overall clarity – and frankly, in games and music environments, it sounds great. Each 50mm driver's dual chamber design is intended to give low, medium and high frequencies space to resonate without interfering with each other, and you do get a sense of that while listening to them.

Elsewhere it's the usual impressive build quality, generous padding, clear mic and high comfort levels over longer play sessions that the Cloud design has always offered. The in-line controls are the only exception to that rule – they feel flimsy in comparison to the rest of the package. I recommend the Alpha over the Cloud II (only just) because of the better frequency response range, although there's very little separating the two models.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Powerful but clear sound
- Bombproof build quality
- ➖ No detachable cable
- ➖ Flimsy in-line controls

SPECS WIRELESS: NO / **DRIVERS:** 50MM DUAL CHAMBER NEODYMIUM / **CONNECTIVITY:** 3.5MM ANALOGUE / **FREQUENCY:** 13HZ-27,000HZ / **FEATURES:** DETACHABLE NOISE-CANCELLING MIC, IN-LINE CABLE CONTROLS

Arctis Pro Wireless

STEELSERIES **£300**

4

Essentially this is a fusion of two great SteelSeries models, old and new. The Arctis Pro Wireless combines the wireless capability and digital control box of the old Siberia 800 model with the comfort and sound performance of the newer Arctis range. Positioned right at the top end of the roster, the Arctis Pro Wireless is all about luxury. You need to pay for that luxury for sure, but what you get is definitely worth the money.

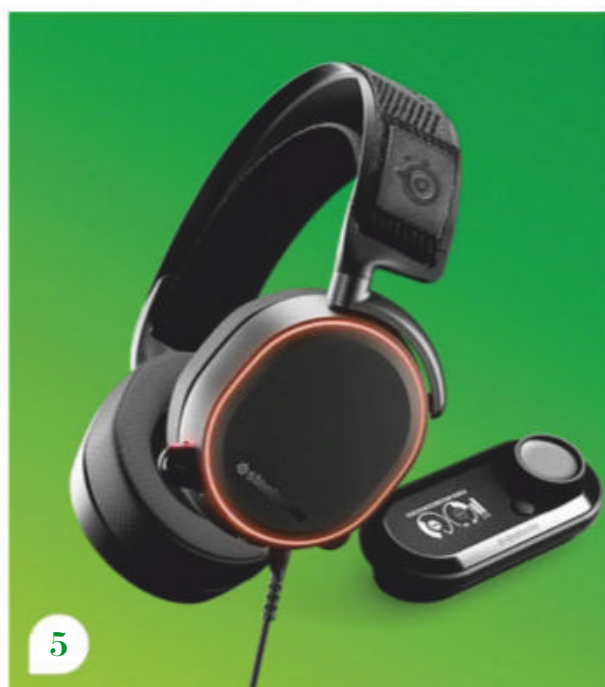
As with the old Siberia 800, I love the ability to change batteries quickly, plugging the depleted one into the base station to charge, and popping the charged one out so that you

never need to plug the headset in, or worse, take a break from gaming while you wait for it to charge. I love the controls housed in that base station's digital display too: chat mix, virtual surround, EQ presets and more can all be adjusted with a few taps. The icing on the cake is Bluetooth: it teams up with the 2.4G wireless connectivity for lossless sound, and means you can use it with mobile devices in addition to your PC. This headset is an excellent all-rounder.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Control everything on one box
- Smart battery switching design
- ➖ Menus sometimes confusing
- ➖ Expensive

SPECS WIRELESS: YES / **DRIVERS:** 40MM NEODYMIUM / **CONNECTIVITY:** USB WIRELESS, OPTICAL, 3.5MM ANALOGUE / **FREQUENCY:** 10HZ-40,000HZ / **FEATURES:** NOISE-CANCELLING MIC, RECHARGEABLE BATTERIES W/ BASE STATION



Arctis Pro + GameDAC

STEELSERIES £230

5 High-res audio is on the up thanks to lossless streaming from Tidal et al, and games such as *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus* offering full support. The Arctis Pro GameDAC makes full use of that crystalline high-resolution sound with a 5Hz-40KHz frequency response range – a spec that also makes the drivers sound great for everyday compressed audio usage. So, if you're planning to use a gaming headset for watching videos, TV, or listening to music on your PC, this is a great choice.

The GameDAC itself is a combination of a digital-to-analogue converter that takes the strain away from your CPU, a

preamp and a control centre. With a press of its button and a roll of the dial, DTS Headphone-X surround can be enabled or disabled, chat/game mix tweaked, and EQ settings perfected. The subtle ring around each earcup on these cans ticks the RGB box without ruining the overall aesthetic. My only reservations with the GameDAC model are that it requires an adapter for smartphone usage, and that its cables feel cheaper than a £230 headset should.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Tasteful RGB lighting
- Handy GameDAC controls
- Cables feel fragile
- Slightly overpriced

SPECS WIRELESS: NO / **DRIVERS:** 40MM NEODYMIUM / **CONNECTIVITY:** USB, OPTICAL, 3.5MM ANALOGUE / **FREQUENCY:** 10HZ-40,000HZ / **FEATURES:** NOISE-CANCELLING MIC, DTS HEADPHONE:X 2.0, RGB

G Pro

LOGITECH £80

6 Logitech designed these cans with the help of esports athletes, with a view to stripping away all the unnecessary cruft that passes for a gaming headset feature list. The aim is to offer a lean and reasonably priced package that focuses in on offering high-performance essentials. Generally speaking, the G Pro delivers on that goal: there's not a flame decal or RGB lighting strip in sight, and that functional aesthetic is matched by a barebones feature set. Looking to complete your RGB hellscape? You don't get that here.

The design is so barebones, in fact, that it might take some by surprise. As well as foregoing the

adolescent aesthetic, the G Pro also skips features like virtual surround, and provides only a mic mute and volume scroll wheel by way of controls. I like the overall sound produced by the drivers, even if it's a bit more pronounced towards the low end than I'd normally choose. If you can live with that, you get an otherwise attractive package with no extra flab all for under £100. It's comfy to wear and, despite the basic build, feels sturdy and likely to last you for years.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Clean, no-fuss design
- Breathable, comfy earcups
- A bit bass-heavy
- Basic build materials

SPECS WIRELESS: NO / **DRIVERS:** 'HYBRID MESH PRO-G' NEODYMIUM / **CONNECTIVITY:** 3.5MM ANALOGUE / **FREQUENCY:** 20HZ-20,000HZ / **FEATURES:** DETACHABLE MIC

YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick the parts you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£956

MOTHERBOARD

**B360M-DS3H**Gigabyte **£70**

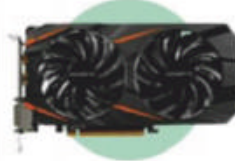
It lacks overclocking options, but the new B360 chipset is far cheaper than the Z370 and is perfect for this budget build.

PROCESSOR

**Core i3-8100**Intel **£114**

A great processor for out-of-the-box gaming performance. Opt for the AMD Ryzen 1300X if you'd like to overclock.

GRAPHICS CARD

**GeForce GTX 1060 Windforce OC 3GB**Gigabyte **£210**

Amidst fluctuating GPU prices, Gigabyte's compact 1060 model offers the best value.

COOLER

**Hyper 212 Evo**CoolerMaster **£25**

Even a budget build can benefit from a good CPU cooler, letting you enjoy a quieter, cooler system.

MEMORY

**Vengeance LPX 8GB (2x4GB) @2400MHz**Corsair **£62**

DDR4 prices are still high, however this Corsair pair is a good value option.

POWER SUPPLY

NEW ENTRY

**CX-M Series CX550M**Corsair **£55**

A UK price spike in our previous EVGA 500W pick opens the door for this quiet Corsair option.

SSD

**MX500 250GB**Crucial **£42**

Crucial's SSD range is fantastic value and offers good performance, too. A 250GB drive can hold your OS and essential programs.

HDD

**WD Blue 1TB 7200RPM**Western Digital **£37**

One terabyte of old-fashioned hard storage is the perfect home for all of your media, backups and storage-hungry games.

CASE

**Neos**Bitfenix **£39**

The Neos provides decent airflow, good support for 3.5-inch hard drives, and a fairly painless build experience.

DISPLAY

**G2460PF**AOC **£199**

This is the cheapest 144Hz gaming monitor you can buy, yet it still offers decent image quality, great performance and Freesync.

KEYBOARD

**K55**Corsair **£50**

This keyboard may lack mechanical keyswitches but it offers decent typing, plus it has RGB and extra gaming keys.

MOUSE

**Rival 110**SteelSeries **£25**

A great sensor, simple design and impressively low price make this a great entry-level gaming mouse.

HEADSET

**Cloud Stinger**HyperX **£28**

We love the HyperX Cloud, but at £70 it's too much for an entry-level system. The Cloud Stinger is the next best thing.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,586

MOTHERBOARD		Z370 Tomahawk MSI £144 This is a nice-looking bit of kit at a good price. Couple that with two M.2 slots, and it's the perfect place to house that Core i5.
PROCESSOR		Core i5-8400 Intel £181 Better default gaming performance and a lower price puts this chip ahead of the AMD Ryzen 2600X.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 2060 Founders Ed. Nvidia £329 Faster and cheaper than a 1070, and ray tracing-ready. Expect an overclocked third-party replacement next month.
COOLER		MasterLiquid Lite 240 CoolerMaster £50 This 240mm, dual-fan, all-in-one liquid CPU cooler is ludicrously cheap, but performs well and stays quiet, too.
MEMORY		Vengeance LPX 16GB (2x8GB) @2666 Corsair £118 16GB is the minimum amount of RAM we'd recommend for a system of this calibre.
POWER SUPPLY		RMx 650W Corsair £105 There's nothing like having a quality power supply. Get a decent cable kit for this one and you can easily spice up your rig.
SSD		MX500 250GB Crucial £42 This is still our SSD of choice. We've kept the capacity the same as our cheaper build, but upgrading to 500GB would be ideal.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200RPM Western Digital £37 SSDs are great, but they're still far from cheap. This 1TB HDD will hold as many games as you will need.
CASE		Eclipse P400S TG Phanteks £80 The clean lines, intuitive build features and fantastic price cements the Eclipse as our mid-range case of choice.
DISPLAY		AGON AG251FZ AOC £290 Not only does this 1080p monitor have a lightning-fast 240Hz refresh rate but it produces decent image quality, too.
KEYBOARD		MasterKeys Pro L CoolerMaster £75 This is one of the cheapest mechanical keyboards, yet it looks and feels great. It only has single-colour backlighting, though.
MOUSE		AW958 Elite Alienware £65 Suitable for any grip thanks to its add-ons, and there's just something about those massive metallic buttons.
HEADSET		HyperX Cloud Kingston £70 Despite the budget price, we recommend this headset. There's simply nothing better for the money.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£3,607

MOTHERBOARD



Strix X470-F Gaming

Asus **£188**

Get the most from the new AMD Ryzen 2700X with this matching X470 motherboard that's packed with features.

PROCESSOR



Ryzen 7 2700X

AMD **£315**

Easy to overclock and with huge performance out of the box, AMD's new flagship CPU is the one to go for.

GRAPHICS CARD

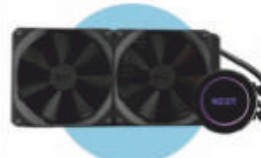


GeForce RTX 2080Ti

Nvidia **£1,099**

For now, Nvidia's own 2080 Ti model is the best GPU pick – tremendous power for little more than a 1080 Ti.

COOLER



Kraken X62

NZXT **£140**

The Kraken is the culmination of three of our favourite things: an infinity mirror, a 280mm radiator and slick braided cooling.

MEMORY



Vengeance LED RGB 32GB @3200

Corsair **£275**

Ryzen is the one processor that does benefit hugely from higher-frequency memory. This kit is perfect for any would-be video expert.

POWER SUPPLY



HX750i 80 Plus Platinum

Corsair **£138**

Modular, custom cable kits, and a platinum efficiency rating. What's not to love about this Corsair PSU? Nothing, that's what.

SSD



970 Evo 500GB M.2 PCIe SSD

Samsung **£119**

Samsung's newest NVMe SSDs push performance to new heights and cost the same as the previous 960 range.

HDD



WD Blue 4TB

Western Digital **£99**

With a large boot SSD, there's little need for a large, cheap SSD. Instead we've opted for a huge 4TB hard drive for all your bulk data.

CASE



Enthoo Evolv ATX TG

Phanteks **£130**

The 5mm thick aluminium panels resonate with svelte professionalism, and the interior makes building inside this a dream.

DISPLAY



XB271HU

Acer **£669**

Our previous choice, the AOC AG271QG, has shot up in price. This Acer is now the best value 165Hz IPS gaming display.

KEYBOARD



K70 LUX RGB

Corsair **£115**

Even when money is no object it's hard to argue against Corsair's latest K70. A no-fuss, solid piece of aluminium craftsmanship.

MOUSE



Mamba Elite

Razer **£90**

A beautiful design, comfortable shape and outstanding performance make this a brilliant high-end gaming mouse.

HEADSET



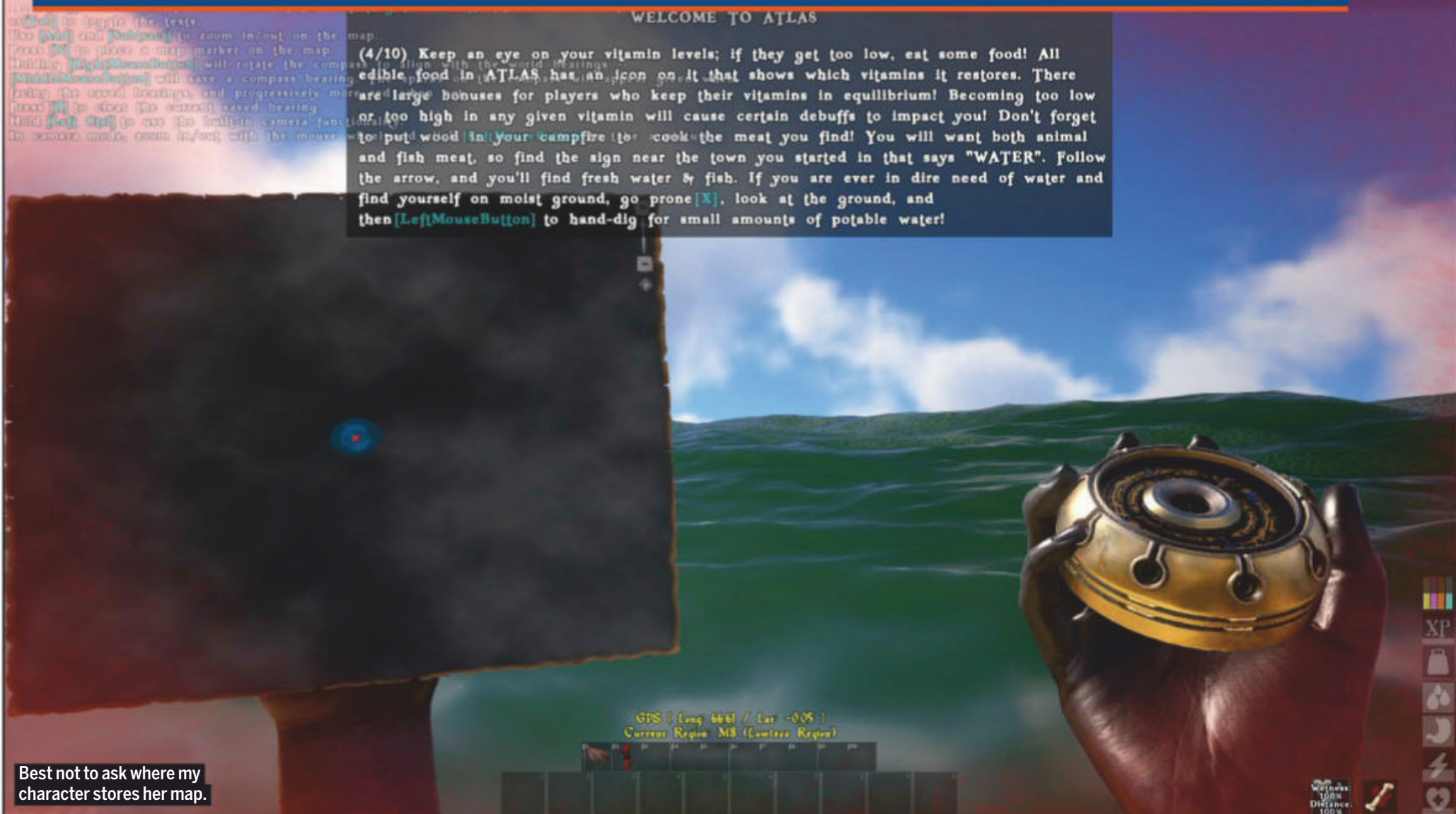
ATH-AG1X

Audio-technica **£230**

What's life without a nice set of cans? The ATH-AG1X set is the pinnacle of headphones, and it's super comfy to boot.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



Best not to ask where my character stores her map.

“I swim face-first into a dolphin (famously a mammal)”

ATLAS: a tale of woman versus shark.

Sometimes life gives you lemons. And by ‘life’ I mean ‘Early Access pirate MMO *Atlas*’, and by ‘lemons’ I mean ‘a spawn point at the bottom of a vast and unforgiving ocean populated by sharks’. I guess I must now try to make some lemonade. And by ‘lemonade’ I mean ‘bloody-mindedly commit to this stupid spawn point and spend over two hours swimming west to find land instead of starting over’.

It wasn’t supposed to be like this. I was supposed to be in one of *Atlas*’s freeports – safe island zones where players can feel out the game’s systems and start levelling up before heading out on their first craft. The

PHILIPPA WARR



THIS MONTH
Took the ‘vE’ part of ‘PvE’ very seriously.

ALSO PLAYED
My Time At Portia

tutorial backs me up on this. “Walk out of the town you start in, and find some bushes,” it says.

Looking around me, there are some fronds of seaweed and a couple of shiny rocks. Also I am making a gurgling noise. I swim for the surface and finally stop suffocating. Perhaps my map and compass will help? My map and compass do not help. There is blue in all directions. While I’m treading water a jellyfish stings me,

taking off half my health bar with a solitary zap.

“The first things you’ll want to craft are the Stone Pick, the Stone Hatchet, and all of the Cloth Armor,” says the game. “Consider a torch and campfire for staying warm and seeing once night time comes around.”

I swim in the direction of ‘away from the jellyfish’ and consult the latest advice from the tutorial. “Find the sign near the town you started in that says ‘WATER,’” it says. “Follow the arrow, and you’ll find fresh water

THE TUTORIAL SEEMS KEEN TO LEAVE BEFORE I ASK ANYTHING AWKWARD



and fish.” I swim face-first into a dolphin (famously a mammal). The tutorial seems keen to leave before I ask anything awkward, like ‘What if I spawned at the bottom of the sea?’

“There’s too much to hope to cover in a simple tutorial,” it says, “so get out there and explore the wide world of *Atlas*. Share your experiences with friends, and most of all,” – I never find out what the most of all is because the tutorial text box is too short by one line so all you can see are the very tops of some letters.

But then all the swimming means I’ve levelled up. If I can just spawn, swim and die enough times I’ll be able to increase my stamina enough to make landfall (maybe)! Stamina is a sticking point because I can only swim so far before it runs out, and, without any solid ground to stand still on and recuperate, I’ll slowly drown. Luckily a level 19 shark chooses that moment to turn up and put me out of my misery.

BATTERED FISH

On the third swim I get into a fistfight with a hammerhead shark. The hammerhead shark does not like the fistfight and kills me immediately. On the seventh swim I punch a sea bass but the sea bass regenerates its health faster than I can punch. I end up with broken bones and drown. On the 10th and 12th swims I spawn in a white expanse of nothing beneath a skybox and fall through the bottom of the world.

But on the 16th swim the game betrays me. I spawn on an island. AN ISLAND. I am furious. If I’m going to double down on an idiotic challenge that no one asked me to undertake, I demand that I be allowed to finish it!

Then a manta ray slides out of the sea, headbutts the beach and rolls onto its back. It’s killed itself in the effort to reach land. What an idiot. ■



“Have I actually achieved anything?”

Falling back in love with **FORZA HORIZON 4**.

PHIL SAVAGE



THIS MONTH
Returned to the '90s.

ALSO PLAYED
Destiny 2

I fell out of love with *Forza Horizon 4* after, presumably broken by a magazine deadline, I became convinced I should try to climb the ranked multiplayer ladder. This is despite not enjoying ranked multiplayer’s finicky team-based game modes and race types. The whole thing was such a singularly miserable experience that I stopped playing the game entirely.

I’m returning now to check out the first expansion, and also because it’s petty to hold a grudge over a game mode that I optionally inflicted upon myself. *Forza Horizon 4*’s first DLC map, Fortune Island, proves to be a bit of a disappointment. The titular fortune is earned by solving occasional riddles that lead to chests containing a fat stack of credits. In a game that gifts you a goddamn house, more free shit is less enthralling than, for instance, *Forza Horizon 3*’s Hot Wheels island – a magical playground of bright orange loop-de-loops.

Nevertheless, going back also reminds me why I loved the game in

the first place. This is how I find myself jostling for position in a '90s estate car, trying to navigate its boxy frame through the narrow streets of Ambleside. Each week, *Forza Horizon 4* sets a new challenge focused around a specific car. This week is the turn of the 1997 Volvo 850 R. My first job is to win four circuit races. I head to the nearest icon, and put this 240BHP monstrosity through its paces.

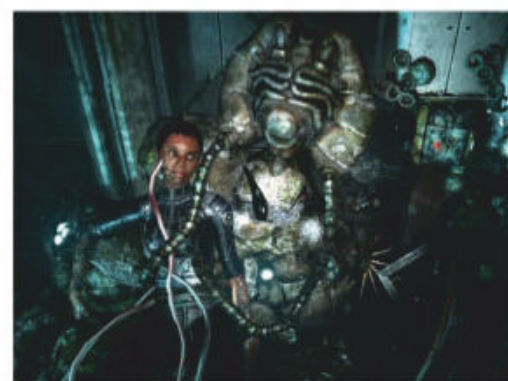
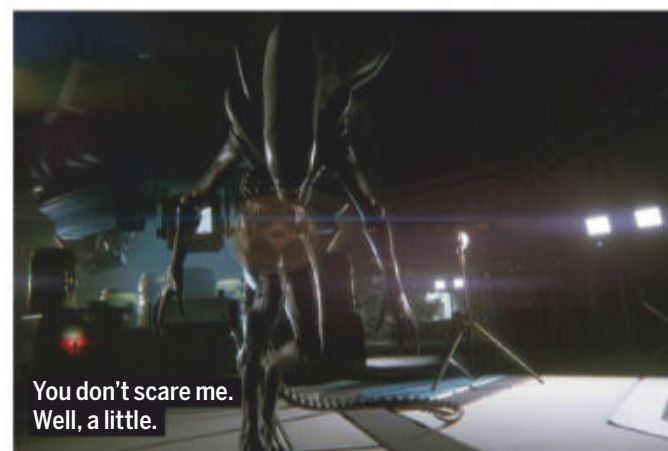
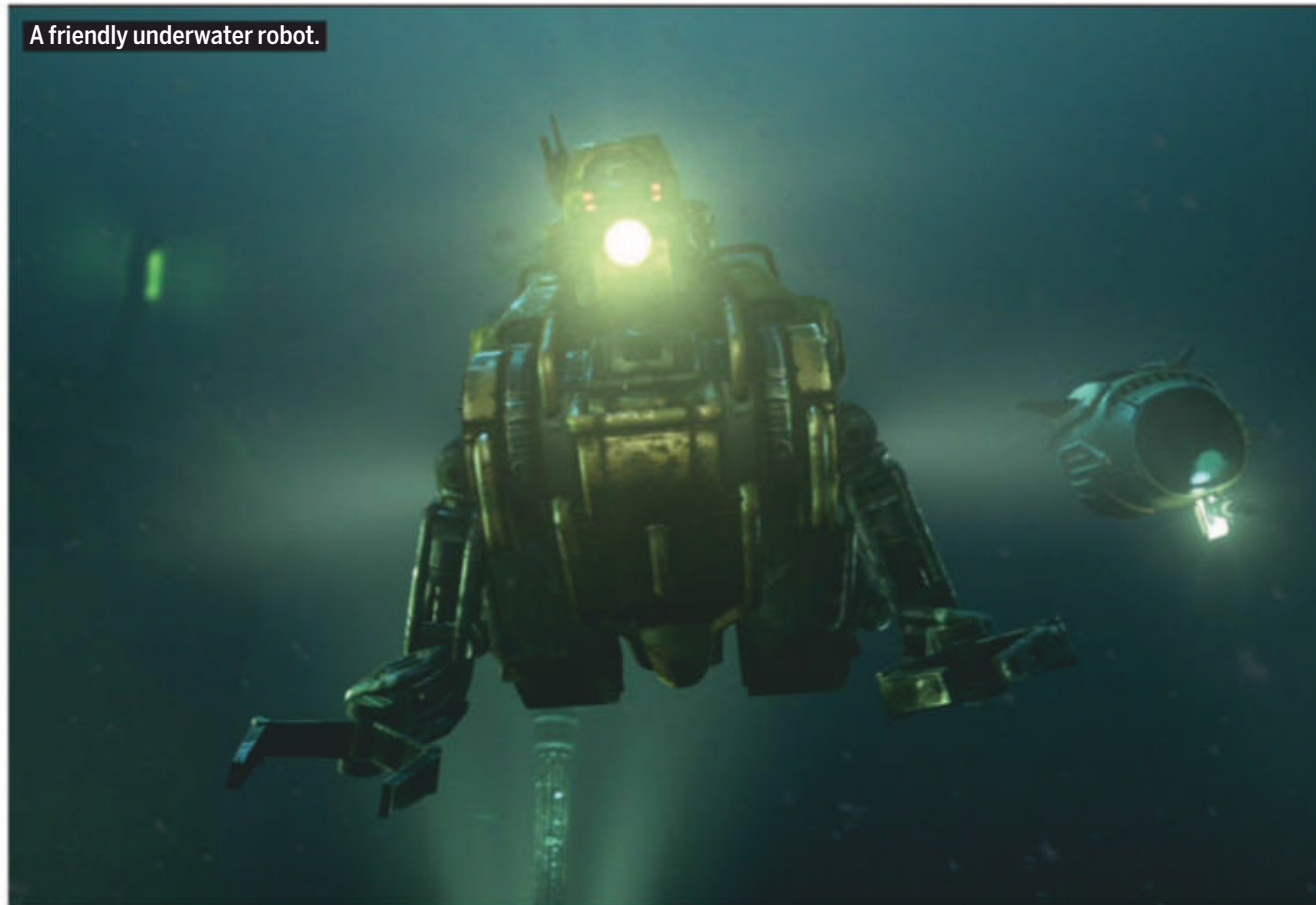
As '90s estates go, the 850 R is decidedly nippy. Almost sporty. *Slaps roof of car*. This bad boy can fit so much deceptive performance in it. The problem is my opponents are not driving estates. They’re in the 394BHP '03 BMW M5 or the 450BHP Audi RS 6. I lose the race.

TUNE UP

It’s time to get under the hood. *Forza Horizon 4* has extensive tuning options, and while I have no idea what I’m doing, other players can upload their own custom tunes. I find one conveniently titled ‘Forzathon’, suggesting it was made specifically for this challenge.

The difference is immediate, and by the end of the first lap I’ve taken the lead. Despite the extra speed, this thick chunk of vehicle manoeuvres well. I easily win my four races. Have I actually achieved anything? No. I just copied someone else’s work. But I also made a Volvo fly through a small Cumbrian village, and that has to count for something. ■

A friendly underwater robot.



“The threat of death isn’t the scariest thing in *SOMA*”

Playing it safe in **SOMA** and **ALIEN: ISOLATION**.

When I reviewed sci-fi horror game *SOMA* in 2015, my biggest complaint was that having to play hide-and-seek with its monsters often got in the way of the story it was trying to tell. So, wanting to immerse myself in that world again without the hassle, I thought I’d give Safe Mode a go. This lets you explore the underwater nightmare of Pathos-II without being constantly murdered. The monsters are still there, but they can’t harm you. And I was amazed by how, despite this, it’s still a really powerful horror game.

The threat of death isn’t the scariest thing in *SOMA*. It’s the existential dread and the claustrophobic, suffocating atmosphere. And I felt like maybe this is what the experience should have been all along. The story was brought to the forefront and it had room to breathe.

Yearning for more industrial corridor action, I decided yet another replay of *Alien: Isolation* was in order. This time, though, I thought I’d play on the novice difficulty setting, which doesn’t neuter the alien, but makes it a lot less formidable. And, again, it’s

▶ **ANDY KELLY**



THIS MONTH
Enjoyed a spot of stress-free survival horror.

ALSO PLAYED
Cultist Simulator, *Hitman 2*

remarkable how well the game holds up when the threat is reduced.

The alien is still unpredictable, making my heart race whenever I hear the telltale sound of it dropping out of a vent. But it’s, well, a bit thicker. I don’t have to be quite as well hidden and it’ll get bored of hunting for me a lot sooner than in other modes. The upside of this dumber alien is that, similar to *SOMA*, I now have more opportunities to explore Sevastopol. There are a lot of stories on the station, told through computer terminals and environmental details, that I missed the first time because I was too concerned with staying alive.

I NOW HAVE MORE OPPORTUNITIES TO EXPLORE SEVASTOPOL

SAFE HAVEN

It does spoil the illusion a little, though. Sometimes you’ll be caught out in the open, the alien will be staring right at you, and you’ll brace yourself for the sweet embrace of death. But then it just wanders away, oblivious to your presence. Balancing the AI for this mode must have been difficult, but I think, overall, they pulled it off. I don’t think you should go through *SOMA* in Safe Mode or *Alien: Isolation* on novice the first time you play them. It’s worth experiencing both as the developers intended. But for a replay it really gives you a chance to appreciate the game on a much deeper level, uncovering more about the setting and story than you would otherwise.

Honestly, I think all horror games should have these modes. I know a lot of people who couldn’t enjoy *SOMA* at all because they found the hide-and-seek bits way too stressful. And because of that they missed out on, for my money, one of the best stories ever told by a game. And that’s a shame. It’s in a developer’s interest to have as many people playing their games as possible, and being able to make stealth, horror, survival, or other ‘hardcore’ elements a little less intense is a big step towards this. ■

“Did you often see female police officers or PIs in the '20s?”

Could Phyllis Malone from **A CASE OF DISTRUST** ever have been a detective?

Although detective fiction gained popularity in the '20s, it remains one of the most potent genres in fiction. *A Case of Distrust* taps into its murky iconography perfectly. Set in 1924's San Francisco, it follows a newly minted PI called Phyllis Malone as she trawls a realm of speakeasies, barbershops and townhouses to solve a case.

Phyllis is a woman with a crummy apartment who noses her way into spaces primarily for men and stakes her claim. She's like the Jessica Jones of the '20s, I thought at one point. But I wondered if her experiences were historically accurate. Did you often see female police officers or PIs in the '20s? I didn't think so. So was this just wish fulfilment, to create an alternative noir story where a woman takes the place of the jaded detective? I dug into the internet to find out.

Things were starting to change for women in the '20s. A movement called the New Woman embraced new fashions, freedom and challenging ideas. Opportunities also rose following World War 2 and women could find work as factory

KIMBERLEY BALLARD



THIS MONTH
Broke into a house as she got high on laudanum.

ALSO PLAYED
Gris, Shelter

workers, secretaries, shop girls and telephone operators. Phyllis fits into this trend, but her role goes further. She's an ex-cop, she drinks and supports herself. You can't forget that most women were housewives at this point, dutiful and feminine.

There were jobs for women in the police force, but these were support roles. I did find one woman, Alice Wells, who was sworn into the LAPD as its first female officer in 1910. Wells also founded the International Association of Policewomen, where she advocated for women's rights. But this was just one amazing woman in a profession created for men.

IT'S EXCITING TO PLAY IN AN ALTERNATE HISTORY WHERE WOMEN HAVE CONTROL

WRITE ON

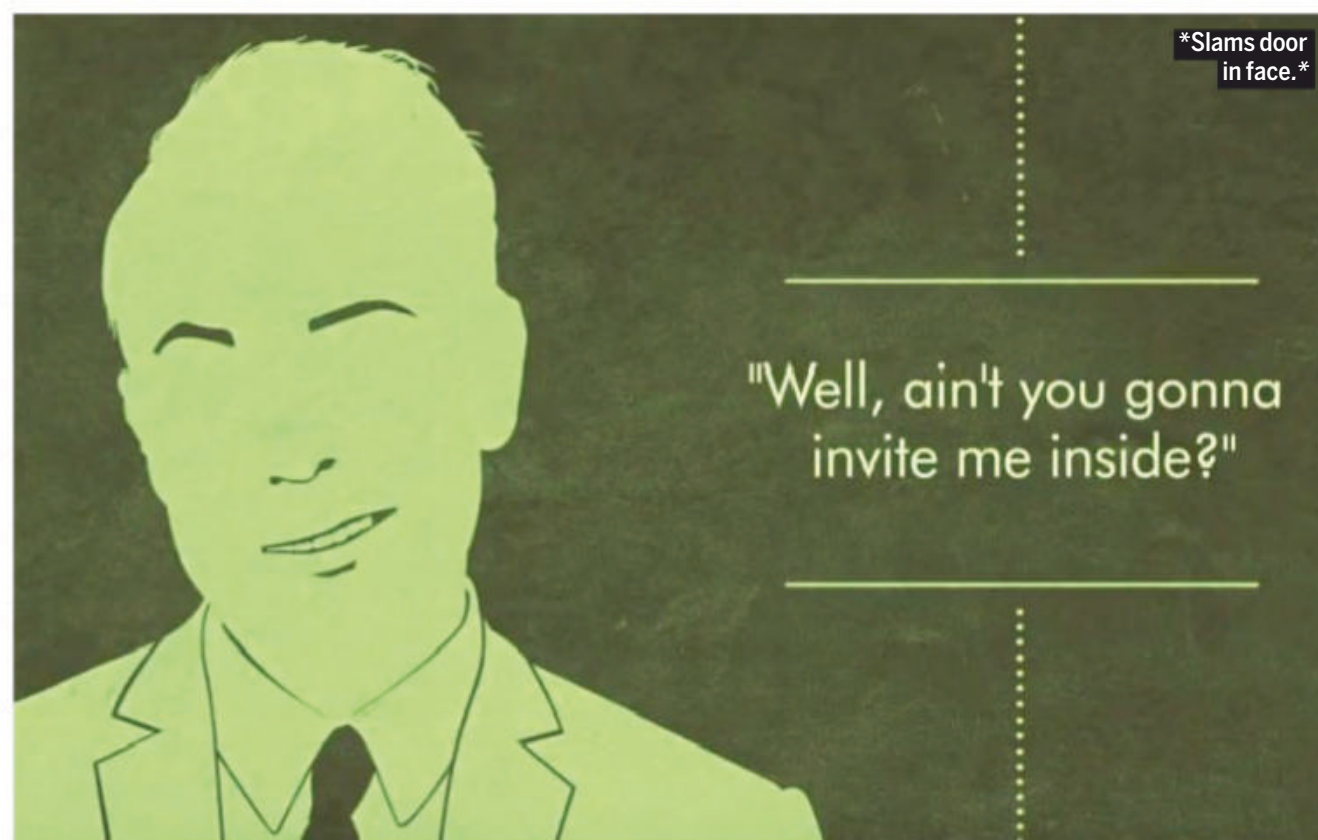
Anne Katharine Green was the first American woman to write detective fiction, and her detective Violet Strange appeared in the novel *The Golden Slipper and Other Problems* in 1915. The first American woman detective to take a central role was Clarice Dyke in Harry Rockwood's crime novels, and it was in the pulp novels of the '30s that the female private eye came into fashion.

I did come upon an example of a real-life female PI: Kate Warne, who joined the Pinkertons in 1856. PIs then were usually part-bodyguards and always men, but in her interview Warne pointed out that women could be “most useful in worming out secrets in many places which would be impossible for a male detective”. In 1858, this was proven true when Warne befriended the wife of the prime suspect in an embezzlement case and acquired evidence that eventually convicted him.

A Case of Distrust isn't historically accurate, but that hardly matters. It's exciting to play in an alternate history where women have control of their bodies and the places they inhabit. I hope the women of the '20s would have loved it just as much. ■



Phyllis acts like your typical noir PI.





THE LONG DARK

Hinterland has given its survival sim's story an overhaul. *By Andy Kelly*

Set in a brutal, freezing Canadian wilderness, *The Long Dark* is quietly one of the best survival games on PC.

Set in the aftermath of a bizarre geomagnetic storm that plunged the world into darkness and rendered all technology useless, you have to battle nature to stay alive. A task made difficult by the wolves, blizzards and inhospitable terrain surrounding you.

The Long Dark left Early Access in August, 2017 and it was here we got our first taste of *Wintermute*, its episodic story mode. Previously the game was limited to an open-ended sandbox, but now there was a story to follow, characters to meet and a goal to strive for. *Wintermute* still has more episodes to go, so the story is still steeped in mystery, but a mysterious locked briefcase seems to be at the heart of it.

The problem was: *Wintermute* wasn't great. It was a nice way to learn the game's many survival systems, but it just wasn't as compelling as making your own stories in the sandbox, and it suffered from forcing you to do too much busywork. That could've been the end of the story, but developer Hinterland listened to the feedback of reviewers and players alike and revamped *Wintermute* in response. The core of the story is still there, but the flow is more streamlined, making

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
August 1, 2017

DEVELOPER
Hinterland

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
www.thelongdark.com

it a less frustrating experience – but retaining that feeling of always being on the edge of death.

The opening in the first version of *Wintermute* was a cutscene, but now there's an interactive sequence where protagonist Will Mackenzie explores his airplane hangar as a storm howls outside. Little details are scattered around here, giving you some insight into his character. It's a much more satisfying way to set the scene than just watching a cinematic.

SCRIPT NOTES

The story has also undergone some big changes. Before, when you climbed out of the ravine, there was a long, difficult slog to Milton, the isolated town where much of the first episode's story takes place. But now, shortly after locating your plane, you stumble on the town much earlier. The tutorials are also less invasive and more spread out, which makes Mackenzie's escape from the crash site way more dramatic.

Mark Meer and Jennifer Hale (yes, both Commander Shepards) play main characters Will and Astrid brilliantly, and the solemn, downbeat score reinforces the gloomy atmosphere of the world. The

production values are impressive throughout, and some of the scenery is stunning.

Dialogue has been rewritten and, in some cases, revoiced and feels much more developed as a result. There are no more long, silent, entirely text-based conversations, and now everything is viewed from the first-person perspective, which makes story sequences feel more integrated into everything else. The relatively simple addition of voices for all conversations improves the story, and your immersion in it, massively.

Other changes include a looser, less prescribed structure with occasional optional sidequests, rebalanced difficulty across the board, and a little more ammo sprinkled around the world. But the important thing is, even with these tweaks, this is still a brutal and uncompromising survival game. While you're following the story you



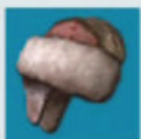
IT'S A MUCH MORE SATISFYING WAY TO SET THE SCENE

have to be smart about gathering resources, seeking shelter and staying well fed, rested and hydrated.

The Long Dark's sandbox is still the star of the show, however. Here you have the freedom to explore a series of large, varied, interconnected maps, and choosing how you spend each day is more engaging than following a path set by a developer. This freedom can result in some memorable (and completely unscripted) moments, like when I ducked into a cave to escape a blizzard, only to see a ravenous bear rise up on its hind legs.

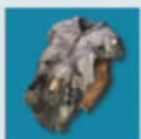
By making these changes to *Wintermute*, Hinterland has made *The Long Dark* a much more complete package. The sandbox and story are different experiences, despite their shared systems, but now they're both much closer in terms of quality. To the point where this is probably the best pure survival game on PC right now. Its understated, painted wilderness is a gorgeous place to spend the end of the world, and the moments of relief when you scrape through another day, barely alive, are exhilarating. ■

STAYING ALIVE *Some of the best gear you can wear*



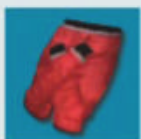
RABBITSKIN HAT

Skin a few rabbits and you can craft this headgear. It has a huge warmth bonus, but it's heavy and adds a lot of carry weight.



BEARSKIN COAT

You'll need to kill a bear for this, but it's worth it. Not only is it warm, but it will intimidate wolves, making them less aggressive.



WOOL LONGJOHNS

This underlayer is one of the warmest, and rarest, pieces of clothing. The downside is they need to be repaired often.



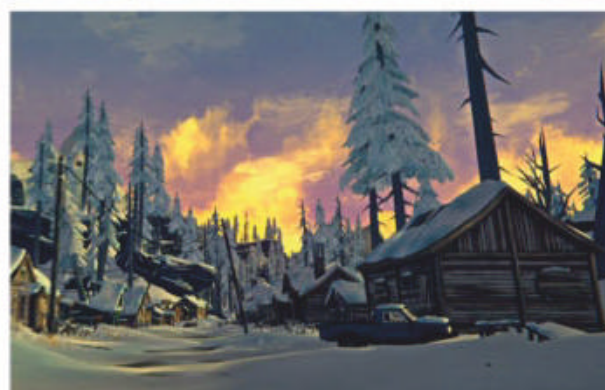
SKI BOOTS

These hefty boots offer warmth and resistance to wind chill, but they're clunky and give you a large penalty to your mobility.

Mackenzie's plane has seen better days.



This is like *BioShock*, but fluffier.

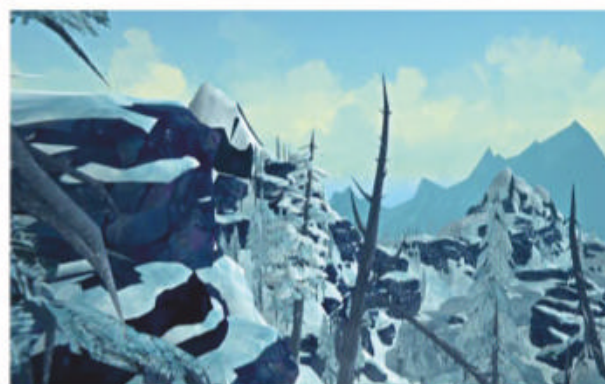


One of a handful of NPCs you'll meet.

The painted skies are frequently stunning.



The geomagnetic anomaly that caused all this.





DISHONORED 2: THE JUDGE OF KARNACA

PART I

Playing judge, jury and executioner in
Arkane's masterful murder sim.

By Rick Lane

THE RULES

1 Judge the actions of NPCs using clues from the Heart.

2 Only kill NPCs with clear evidence of wrongdoing.

3 A High Chaos rating must be avoided if possible.

The *Dishonored* games are often described as being about choice, but it might be more fitting to say they are about judgement. After all, when you make decisions in *Dishonored*, you aren't simply selecting from a list of potential actions, as you would order a dish from a takeaway menu. Instead, those decisions are always made with a view to their potential consequences. What's the best way to clear out this room? Or what's the best way to sneak through it? How should I kill this person? Actually, should I kill them at all?

This notion of judgement is most evident in the assassination targets Corvo and Emily pursue in each mission, who can be dispatched via lethal or nonlethal methods. *Dishonored 2* never guides players toward one option or the other, yet throughout each level are documents, recordings and other environmental details that provide insight into that character's life and personality, helping players judge for themselves the best way to deal with their target.

Yet beyond these key imperial conspirators is an Empire bustling with criminals and rogues. The cities of Dunwall and Karnaca are prowled by corrupt guards and thuggish gangsters, while all manner of thieves and killers hide in plain sight among the Empire's citizenry.

Hence, what if we extrapolated *Dishonored*'s core mechanic across every citizen in *Dishonored 2*, dispensing justice like a whalepunk Judge Dredd? That's my plan for this run of *Dishonored 2*. I will be the judge, jury and executioner for all of Karnaca, safeguarding the innocent and killing the guilty.

My first judgement is simple, who to play as. For this run, I'm going to play as Corvo. While I think Emily's powers are more interesting, particularly the wonderful Domino, a couple of Corvo's abilities, namely Possession and Slow Time, are more useful for manipulating and eliminating individual targets in crowded environments.

"FORGIVENESS ISN'T MY SPECIALITY"

For the first mission, however, I'll have to exact my judgements sans powers, or much of anything really. Emily has been overthrown by the witch Delilah and her lapdog the Duke of Serkonos, while I've been locked inside Emily's private chambers by the traitorous captain of the guard, Mortimer Ramsey. In addition to treason, I've just watched Ramsey cold-bloodedly murder one of the Watch's lieutenants, so I'm feeling unambiguous about what his fate is going to be.

The same goes for the four of Ramsey's guards lurking inside the palace. As I start prowling the halls, I see that there are bodies everywhere, far more than Ramsey could have killed on his own. These "traitorous dogs" as Corvo himself puts it, are clearly Ramsey's most trusted aides, so I feel little regret as I sneakily cut them down. Ramsey

isn't long for the world, either. I hide behind a stack of shelves as he heads to unlock Emily's vault, and shish kebab him through the shoulder as he passes.

With everyone inside dead, I head to the streets. Out here, I'm less certain about how to deal with the guards. The streets are littered with dead civilians

and watchmen loyal to Emily. Clearly Dunwall is ripe with murderers, but I've no idea who's done what.

As I cross the rooftops to the palace gate, a sergeant declares to his men that, "We're in this with the Duke, sink or swim." I decide to help them all sink with the addition of several new orifices. For the remainder of the level, I resolve that my priority needs to be to get out of Dunwall with my skin intact. If I can sneak past the guards, fine, but if they attack me, all bets are off. Without my powers, skulking around is tricky, and I get into several messy fights. The only considered judgement I make is to put a bullet in a sergeant about to murder a local journalist. "Forgiveness isn't my speciality," Corvo tells the journalist afterward, a fitting motto given what I have planned.

HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS

In the end, I escape Dunwall leaving 13 guards dead. Considering the situation, I'm okay with this, but I would

have preferred a less chaotic start.

Thankfully, after a visit from the Outsider, I get my powers back. More importantly still, I get the Heart.

The Heart of a Living Thing is the most important tool in this approach to playing *Dishonored 2*. Its purpose is to guide you toward upgrades, but if you right-click on an NPC with the Heart equipped, it will tell you that person's innermost secrets. With the Heart, I'm no longer reliant on appearances. I can see right into people's souls; quite useful for a self-appointed judge of humankind.

Newly empowered, I step onto Karnaca docks for the first time. Officially I'm on the trail of the Crown Killer, which leads toward an old Solarium known as the Addermire Institute. But I have plenty of other work to do en-route, starting right here, on the jetty.

DUNWALL IS RIPE WITH MURDERERS, BUT I'VE NO IDEA WHO'S DONE WHAT





✶ I set the Heart to work, and instantly I've got a raft of judgements to make. "At the gaming table, he keeps cheating cards in his boot," the Heart tells me of one dockworker. I'm not killing someone for that. At the end of the jetty, a woman is taking photographs of the ocean. "She tells them it's whale meat, but it's not," the Heart whispers. I'm ready to spring upon this cannibal-by-proxy, when I realise the Heart was not specific about what meat was being served. Now that I'm out of the treasonous mire of Dunwall, I don't want to kill someone unless I'm sure they deserve it. If the Heart says something ambiguous like that, I'm going to ignore it.

With this rule in place, I move further into the docks. Interestingly, my next couple of targets don't come from the Heart at all. At a jetty farther down the dockside, an altercation over money ends in a man openly bludgeoning two people to death with a length of pipe. We have a winner! I slit his throat and drop the body in the ocean. I then turn the corner and head up the street, where I catch a guard pushing a man into an electrified wall of light. I'm too slow to save the poor fellow, but I can at least give him justice. I swoop down, choke out the guard, and throw his unconscious body into the wall of light. Zap!

I return up the same street when the Heart delivers its first proper target. A woman is leaning on a balcony on the floor above. "She tells the children it's just tea, and when they're asleep, she puts them on boats bound for Morley." Crikey, that's nasty. Frankly I can't think of a punishment harsh enough, so I plant a springrazor on her back, and blink away before it triggers.

It's interesting how the Heart's stories tug and pull at my own sense of ethics. I quickly decide that I'm not killing anyone for stealing. Partly because it's excessive, and partly because I'm practically hoovering up stuff that doesn't belong to me as I explore, and I'm not comfortable with that level of hypocrisy. At one point, the Heart whispers a story to me that I really struggle with. It relates to a man tending a ramshackle dockside tavern. "He took her books, and made her watch as he burned them." The thought of it makes me genuinely angry, but

THE PIE OF JUSTICE

By the time I left Addermire, I killed 36 NPCs. Here's why they died.

Treason: 22%

Murder: 34%

Getting in my way while I escaped Dunwall (but also probably treason): 16%

Human trafficking: 3%

Animal abuse: 3%

Torture: 8%

Attempted murder: 6%

Conspiracy to murder: 8%

cruel and nasty as such an action is, in the end I stay my blade. If I'm giving thieves a pass, it would be wrong to kill for destruction of property, however vindictive.

I continue up the hill, judging as I go. The Overseer's Headquarters proves particularly fruitful. From a rooftop, I drop blade-first onto the shoulders of someone who had a woman dragged to her death for witchcraft. Inside, the Heart hisses of another, "He's not a believer, but he tortures them anyway." Wow, champion of the world here. I use a flame dart for this one.

By the time I jump into a carriage bound for Addermire, I've relieved another 16 people of their vicious lives, and those were just the really bad ones. All-told, I'm feeling pretty bleak about *Dishonored's* world as the Art Deco bulk of Addermire looms into view.

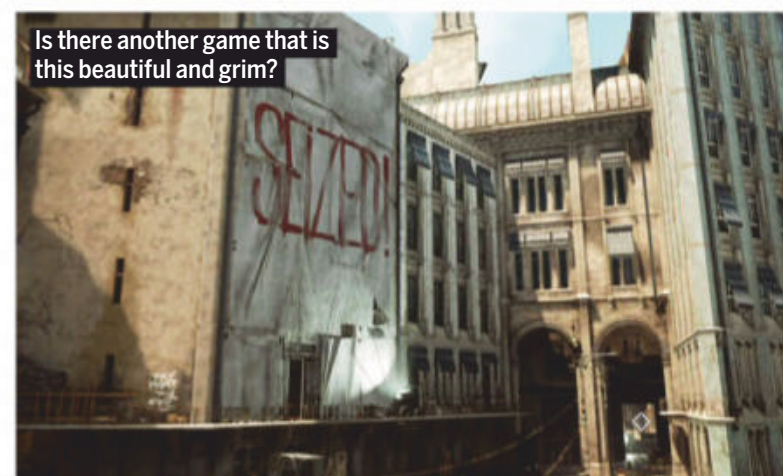
CAT PERSON

Mercifully, Addermire appears to have sensed my ailing mood and prescribes a remedial sprinkling of decency. As I arrive and explore the area surrounding the carriage station, I find guards who for once are more kind than cruel. "He'll never be a rich man, but he is honest," it says of one watchman. Of another, the Heart whispers "He gives part of his rations to two street urchins." I love the colour the Heart's oral vignettes add to the world, but it's a relief to use a paint that isn't black.

I sneak by this little cluster of wholesomeness. Upon entering Addermire proper, Karnaca's ugliness rises to the surface again. "He crushed her fingers and told her she needed a permit to fiddle on street corners." Grim, but I grit my teeth and move on. "She dumped them in the bay." I draw my sword, but for all I know the Heart could be talking about fly-tipping, so I settle for a sleep dart and head to an outdoor terrace.



Mortimer Ramsey was always a pain in the neck.



Is there another game that is this beautiful and grim?



“He threw her cat out of the window.” Okay, murder time. I rush across the terrace and gut Addermire’s resident cat-launcher. But in my haste I neglect to check my surroundings and alert a cluster of guards to my presence, including a pistol-toting officer. Once I escaped Dunwall, I resolved that bets were no longer off, so I don’t want to kill any of these guards unless I’m sure they deserve it.

What ensues is a semi-farcical battle across the terrace as I deflect blades and bullets with my sword, while juggling the Heart to see into the souls of my opponents. The grunts have done nothing particularly egregious, so I knock them out with a combination of sleep darts and stun mines. The officer, however, is a rum one. “He put the poison in the wine and replaced the cork. He plans to give it to his father as a gift.” Oh aye? Well, I’ve got a gift for you pal. Plot twist, the gift opens you.

I RUSH ACROSS THE TERRACE AND GUT ADDERMIRE’S CAT-LAUNCHER

With the officer dead, I focus on completing my objectives. In the end, I leave Addermire with seven more souls weighed upon my imaginary scales. I spared the Crown Killer, however, for story reasons that I won’t spoil.

As I leave Addermire, I reflect on my actions so far. I feel like I’ve been sufficiently strict with my judgements.

Okay, maybe the cat thing was an overreaction, but nearly all the others have been traitors, murderers, or worse. Nonetheless, up to this point I’ve killed 36 people, leaving me with a High Chaos rating. If I carry on like this, my overall effect on Karnaca and the Empire will be negative.

If I’m going to continue, I’ll have to start thinking longer term, and focus on eliminating the apples that aren’t just bad but seething with maggots. Otherwise, I’m liable to doom the Empire to a fate worse than if I’d stayed a prisoner in Dunwall. ■





It all starts with a seemingly-simple request.

DISCWORLD NOIR

A detective adventure with a fantasy twist. *By Andy Kelly*

Discworld is a series of fantasy novels by the late, great Terry Pratchett, famous for its slapstick humour and scathing social commentary. And at the heart of some of its best stories is Ankh-Morpork, a massive walled city rife with corruption, pollution and social division. While the first two Discworld adventure games, starring hopeless wizard Rincewind, were colourful, lighthearted capers, *Discworld Noir* uses the rain-soaked streets of Ankh-Morpork as the backdrop for a shadowy crime thriller, taking stylistic cues from film noir and hard-boiled detective fiction.

It's a familiar detective story, but set in an irreverent fantasy world filled with trolls, ghouls and vampires.

Our cynical, world-weary hero is Lewton, a former member of Ankh-Morpork's famous City Watch turned private eye. A beautiful, mysterious woman, Carlotta, walks into his office one dark and stormy night and asks him to find her ex-lover: a man named Mundy. And like any good Chandlerian mystery, this seemingly simple job quickly spirals into something much more complex and dangerous.

Like the Discworld novels, *Noir* is heaving with subtle (and not-so-subtle) pop culture references. Samael, a vampiric pianist in a smoky dive called Cafe Ankh, is an amusingly on-the-nose homage to noir classic Casablanca. Lewton even says, "Play it again, Samael." I should have rolled my eyes at that point, but in the moment it was pretty funny. And when Lewton meets Count

Überwald, a rich old man in a wheelchair hiding in a greenhouse, Philip Marlowe's similar meeting with the reclusive General Sternwood in *The Big Sleep* comes to mind.

DARK SIDE

A lot of adventure games plunder film noir, whether it's *Grim Fandango* (itself partly inspired by Casablanca) or corny FMV games such as *The Dame Was Loaded*. But, importantly, *Discworld Noir* never feels stifled by its reverence for the greats of the genre. It has enough personality of its own – thanks mainly to the inherently unique, interesting Discworld setting – to feel like more than just a pastiche. And when Lewton gains the ability to turn into a werewolf in the third act, it becomes even more distinct. When did Bogie ever sprout fangs and fur?

Playing *Discworld Noir* for the first time, I'm surprised by the lack of

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
1999

DEVELOPER
Perfect Entertainment

PUBLISHER
GT Interactive

LINK
www.bit.ly/discnoir



Much of the game is prerendered.



I'm sure he has a great personality.

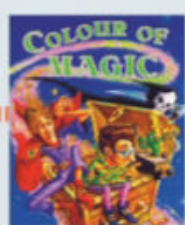


Lewton has a great silhouette.

puzzles. Knowing it was a point-and-click adventure from the '90s, I'd braced myself for combining absurd objects in increasingly contrived ways, but found myself mostly just talking to people. In this sense, it's a truer detective game than most. As Lewton speaks to the citizens of Ankh-Morpork, a noirish trumpet drone indicates a clue being written down in his notebook. This then opens up further conversation options, creating a labyrinthine trail of clues that eventually snakes towards... well, I won't spoil it, but the story takes some interesting, and unexpected, turns.

It's slow, though. At times painfully so. The dialogue is entertaining, mostly funny, and the actors do a fine job. But there are so many conversations that I would have actually appreciated a preposterous item puzzle, just to mix things up. And I often found myself at a dead end, unable to progress because I hadn't talked to the right person at the right time about the right thing, leaving me wandering the streets of Ankh-Morpork, clicking on everything, trying desperately to pick up the breadcrumb trail.

DISCOGRAPHY *A brief history of Discworld videogames*



THE COLOUR OF MAGIC 1986

A text adventure based on the first novel, and the only Discworld game adapted from a book.



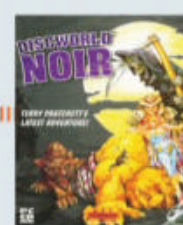
DISCWORLD 1995

A humorous point-and-click adventure starring useless wizard Rincewind, who's played brilliantly by Monty Python's Eric Idle.



DISCWORLD II 1996

Rincewind's journey continues with the fool being tasked with convincing Death himself to come out of retirement.



DISCWORLD NOIR 1999

An atmospheric adventure set in the city of Ankh-Morpork, inspired by classic film noir and pulp detective fiction.

In the second act, a series of unfortunate events results in Lewton becoming the prime suspect in a spate of killings known as the Counterweight Murders. Sam Vimes, head of the City Watch and a major character in the Discworld novels, fingers Lewton for the crime, and this causes a chain reaction of bad luck for the permanently unlucky private dick. By the end of the game Lewton will have encountered a sinister cult, a talking dog, a magical sword and other weirdness besides.

It's a wonderful mess of a story with a few great moments, but overall it gets a bit too complicated for its own good. Then again, that is a signature of the detective novels from the '40s that inspired the game, so maybe it's intentional.

WRITE STUFF

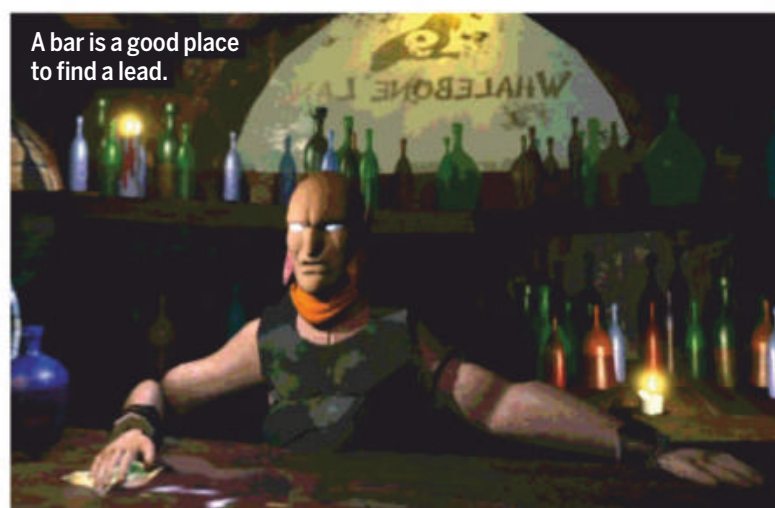
Terry Pratchett was involved in the creation of *Discworld Noir*, providing a story outline and editing the script – the meat of which was actually written by author Chris Bateman. For



Lewton pays Carlotta a visit.



It's always raining in the city.



A bar is a good place to find a lead.

the voice of Lewton and other characters including Nobby Nobbs, who Discworld fans will recognise, Welsh comedian Rob Brydon was hired. At the time Brydon hadn't done much besides voice work, but has since made a name for himself in popular UK sitcom *Gavin & Stacey*, and with Steve Coogan in the magnificent *The Trip*. The cast also includes Robert Llewellyn (perhaps

best known for playing the robot Kryten in *Red Dwarf*), Nigel Planer and Kate Robbins.

Robbins, who plays every female character in *Discworld Noir*, recorded her parts in a day, while Brydon, according to Bateman, endured a "gruelling week" to complete his. But the result is a brilliantly acted game, with Brydon really throwing himself into Lewton's

comically overwrought monologues. "The troll stepped out of the shadows like light was too intimidated to illuminate him," he says in the tough, clipped style of an old Hollywood movie detective. Later, "I like my whisky straight up, with a whisky chaser." I also particularly enjoyed his rant to a former lover in a bar, where he laments, pathetically: "You don't know what it's like to go into a restaurant and ask for a table for one."

THE BIG SLEEP

The sad story behind Discworld Noir

In 1999, the year *Discworld Noir* was released, its London-based developer Perfect Entertainment was permanently shut down. A costly legal dispute with Psygnosis over unpaid royalties was instrumental in its demise, and the final year of the game's development was plagued by staff shortages, rescheduled deadlines and late salary payments. To make matters worse, its publisher, GT Interactive, was having financial troubles of its own, with losses of \$90 million leading to the company being massively downsized and sold to French publisher Infogrames. As a result, *Discworld Noir* was never released outside of Europe and eventually faded into obscurity.



TALKING POINT

Compared to some other detective games, you don't have to do much actual legwork in *Discworld Noir*. There's no manually piecing clues together as in Frogwares' brilliant *Sherlock Holmes: Crimes & Punishments*, no tense *L.A. Noire*-style interrogations. But as the clues pile up in your notebook, knowing which threads to pull makes you, very occasionally, feel like you're doing some real detecting. There are a lot of characters in Ankh-Morpork, and a lot of conversation topics, which means it's easy to venture down the wrong path and waste time chasing phantom leads.



No, this is not
a pretty game.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO DO MUCH ACTUAL LEGWORK IN *DISCWORD NOIR*

However, Lewton's aforementioned transformation into a werewolf does mix things up. In this form he can literally sniff out clues, picking up scents – visualised as colours – that are associated with certain characters. This supernatural twist adds an extra layer of complexity to your investigation, giving you more threads to yank and untangle. The werewolf stuff is also introduced fairly late into the game, which is a pretty bold design decision when you think about it. Most games would hinge entirely around a concept like this and not just throw it in towards the end.

STINK BOMB

The smell system is a little clumsy to use, though. All the scents you've picked up are stored in an inventory of sorts, and if you've identified the source of one their name will appear when you hover over it. Then when

you encounter a scent during your investigation, you can drag one out of your smell-ventory and see if they match. That might sound fine, but it's clunky in execution – and it doesn't help that the colours of some of the scents are almost identical to each other. But hey, I always appreciate a developer trying to do something fresh and imaginative with the adventure genre.

Unfortunately, running *Discworld Noir* on a modern PC can be an ordeal. I couldn't get it to cooperate with Windows 10 at all, so had to install a Windows 95 virtual machine to play the thing. And because both developer Perfect Entertainment and publisher GT Interactive no longer exist, the chances of anyone getting hold of the source code and remastering it are pretty slim. But, in a weird way, that's all part of *Discworld Noir*'s legend. It's always been hard to find and hard to run – something you have to work to play – and I like that in this age of instantly accessible entertainment.

But is it worth the hassle? Honestly, I don't think *Discworld Noir* is a classic. It looks ancient compared to *Grim Fandango*, which was

released only a year earlier. The pace is languid, the story meandering and there isn't much to do besides sit and listen to people talk. It's incredibly dark, which results in some frustrating pixel hunting as you try and find an interaction point amongst the gloom. But I still think it's worth playing, if only for its atmosphere, which captures the downbeat, nihilistic feeling of a film noir better than most games. There are much better point-and-click adventures out there, but few that draw you into their setting quite so completely.

With the sad death of Terry Pratchett in 2015, the chances of there ever being another Discworld game are pretty much zero. So this makes *Discworld Noir*, and the two Rincewind adventures, even more special. But one of the brilliant things about this game in particular is that you don't have to know a thing about Pratchett's intricate universe, or have read any of the 41 novels, to play it. You might miss out on a few references, but for the most part it's a standalone story. Now you'll just have to decide whether it's worth the bother of installing a virtual machine on your PC to play it. ■



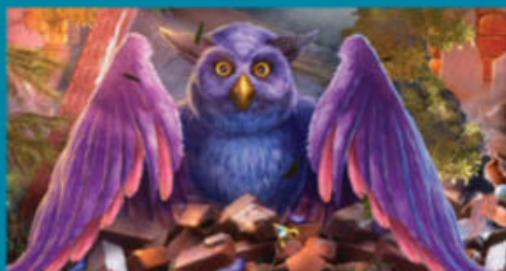
WHY I LOVE

WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL



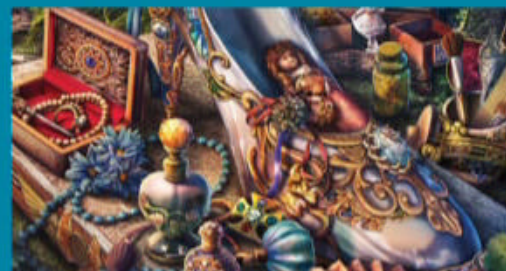
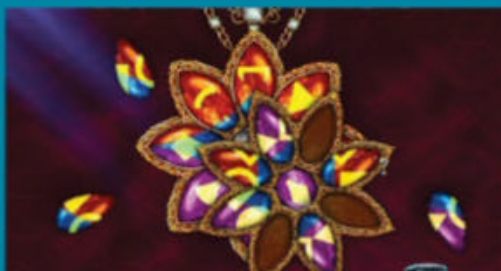
HIDDEN OBJECT PUZZLE ADVENTURES

Calm and collecting. *By Philippa Warr*



LEFT: This is a magic owl with concussion.

RIGHT: Putting a pendant back together is a typical minigame.



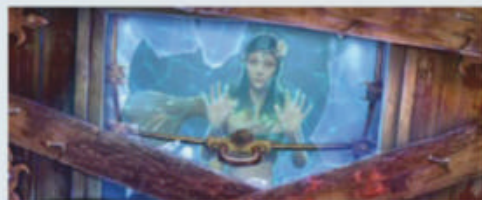
There's a specific kind of relaxation that I associate with hidden object puzzle adventures. HOPAs are that endless stream of games, often aimed more at tablet than browser, about collecting and using objects. They get their name from the way the player is repeatedly given a cluttered scene and is tasked with finding particular objects within it, like a visual wordsearch. But they can also involve minigames, simple skill challenges and so on. As a very general description, they're the beach read version of point-and-click adventures.

The relaxation I feel when playing hidden object puzzle adventures is a similar kind to that which I get from jigsaw puzzles, origami, crochet, romance novels, crime procedurals, Rubik's Cubes and more. It's the type of relaxation where your hands or eyes are kept busy as you follow a step-by-step process towards a certain (or at least predictable) outcome. Given enough time the jigsaw will be completed, the bird folded, the cushion finished, the love story fulfilled, the murderer caught and the colours matched.

Whether or not the outcome is important, it's the process of getting there that's valuable to me. With jigsaws I can shrug off stress or anxiety by narrowing my focus to exactly 1,000 puzzle pieces, all of which have a single correct placement and will eventually build into an image I already know I like because it's why I picked the box up in the first place. Jigsaws are the opposite of that 'Where do you see yourself in five years time?' job interview question.

With origami, I'm essentially following instructions, but within that there's a joy in manipulating the paper. There's the pleasure of a sharp crease, or a deft movement. There's a sense of familiarity when a new project requires you start with a shape you've made thousands of

GIVE IT A GO *Standout HOPAs*



NIGHTMARES FROM THE DEEP

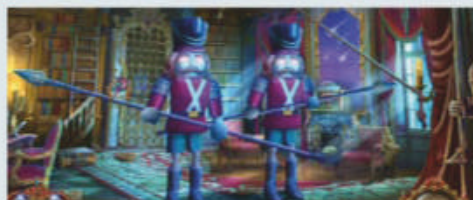
Follow the escapades of Sarah Black, a museum curator who must repeatedly deal with undead menace Davy Jones.

GRIM LEGENDS

This series of puzzlers uses the trappings of fairytales to tell stories of mysterious ruined weddings, cursed families and powerful artefacts.

MURDER SHE WROTE

Available through Big Fish's own platform, in this game amateur detective Jessica Fletcher pokes around crime scenes solving five murders.



DARK PARABLES

These twists on traditional fairy stories use hidden object scenes that focus on pieces of an object, not an arbitrary list.

times before. There's a soothing rhythm of production when you're making lots of the same object, like a thousand cranes.

For fiction, particularly murder mysteries in the vein of *Bones* or *CSI*, you're both watching other people assemble a jigsaw made of forensic clues and trying to piece them together yourself. Because it's fiction you know that everything will be wrapped up neatly so the cast's end of the jigsaw is basically sorted.

On your end you're partly picking up on their science chit-chat and partly using your own expertise in primetime telly. 'That lad's the murderer because he was one of the first three guest actors we met and he's the one who doesn't yet have a clear motive!' – it won't stand up in a court of law, but you'll be entirely correct. This pattern of plotting is just engaging enough to hold your attention, but it won't consume you. Instead it acts as a canvas for interpersonal drama, character jokes and more.

So to circle back round to hidden object games, I used to think of them as closest to jigsaws. There's a

preordained location for each piece of the overarching puzzle and the pleasure is in slotting them into place. Within that there's the test of visual skill as you pick objects out of a scene. But after my most recent binge I've seen more elements from those other hobbies at play.

FINDING YOUR FEET

The common basic structure of HOPAs allows you to notice the differences between studios, picking out favourite developers or franchises, as with authors or TV showrunners. I have a preferred style for the hidden object scenes themselves. I like them to be incredibly cluttered, but I hate finding long, thin objects because I struggle to notice them, despite knowing the familiar hiding spots. On the origami side, returning to a scene for a different set of objects offers that flicker of familiarity I get from paper base shapes, and a similar divergence of purpose.

For the stories I like them to be a little menacing, but without going full horror. That cuts through the genre's more saccharine tendencies without resorting to creepy doll faces. And, even if a specific plot isn't interesting, there are often characters and settings I'll like enough to follow

THERE'S A PREORDAINED LOCATION FOR EACH PIECE OF THE OVERARCHING PUZZLE

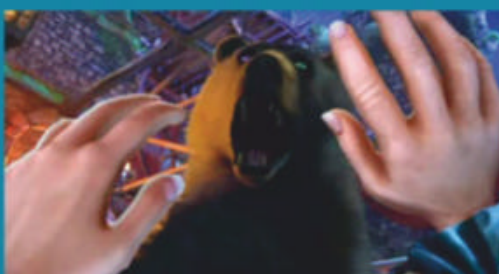
them across multiple stories.

Not every purchase has been a good one – as with any genre, there are duffs, cash-ins and franchises that aren't as good now as they used to be. But in those instances it's also easier to notice the constant mechanical pleasure of hidden object puzzle adventures. Clicking through a to-do list, remembering the heart-shaped lock when you encounter a heart-shaped key, and, above all, the knowledge that all the loose ends will be tied up in a neat, conclusive bow. ■



LEFT: This HOPA scene is about collecting herbs.

RIGHT: Panic, pursued by a bear.



PHIL SAVAGE



I never watched *Citizen Kane*, but have seen multiple seasons of *Deadliest Catch*. I never read *1984*, but own four volumes of the manga *Excel Saga*. I've never played *Planescape: Torment*, but have spent 100 hours with *Plants vs. Zombies*.



FORZA HORIZON 4

www.forzamotorsport.net

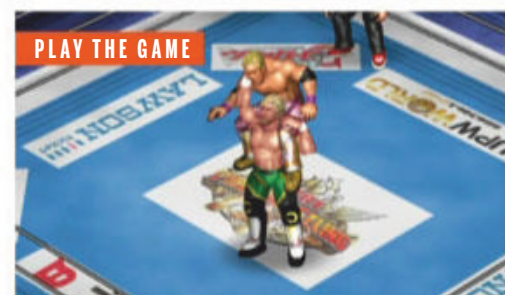
→ Some car games don't have a button dedicated to rewinding time. They make you drive around Laguna Seca and, when you crash on that downhill corkscrew bit, force you to just live with it. Screw that. I don't want to deal with the consequences of my mistakes. Give me a rewind button. Give me *Forza Horizon 4*.



EARTH DEFENSE FORCE 4.1

www.d3p.co.jp

→ Be honest with yourself: you probably need to replace your mattress. You won't, but you know you should. It's a nagging irritation in the back of your mind that means you really don't have the patience for calculating tactical squad buffs right now. Here is a game where you just shoot some ants instead.



FIRE PRO WRESTLING WORLD

www.spike-chunsoft.com

→ In 2016, professional wrestler-slash-*Assassin's Creed* tribute act Will Ospreay tweeted of one of his signature moves, "You just need to accept that you live in this world. A world where a move is called a 'Cheeky Nandos Kick.'" I think about that tweet a lot for some reason. This is a videogame about wrestling.



THE NORWOOD SUITE

www.bit.ly/norwoodsuite

→ I loved this quirky adventure about a surreal musical hotel. At least, I loved the 30 minutes that I played before being distracted – probably by ice cream and, soon afterwards, feeling sleepy from too much ice cream. I've put this here to guilt trip myself into playing more of it before this issue goes on sale.

MUST PLAY

A PERSONAL LIST
OF THE BEST
GAMES YOU CAN
PLAY RIGHT NOW

by Phil Savage



RED ALERT 2

www.ea.com

→ Some people think developers should keep politics out of games, but this RTS series opens with a time-travelling Einstein assassinating Hitler with a handshake. This, the sequel, features Ray Wise as the US president saying, "I don't give a wooden nickel about your legacy," to the Soviet premier. Politics!



KATAMARI DAMACY REROLL

www.bandainamcoent.com

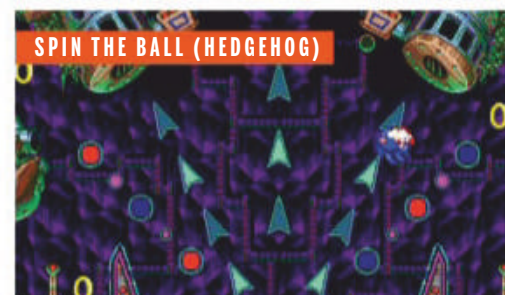
→ You, a small thing, roll your ball over crayons and propane tanks and schoolboys and dried kelp and dairy cows and marmalade and fiddler crabs and cabbage. The ball gets bigger. The bouncy music suggests that its victims are ultimately accepting of their fate. They are part of the ball now. They can finally rest.



SEA OF THIEVES

www.seaofthieves.com

→ Our ship is laden with loot. As we head back to port to sell our plunder, we notice another ship. Warily, we dock. It sails towards us. "Hello," a voice calls out. It sails closer still. Not willing to take the risk, we open fire. As the boat sinks, the voice calls out again. "I'm new. I don't know what's happening." Er, whoops.



SONIC SPINBALL

www.sega.co.uk

→ I still haven't found time to check out *Yoku's Island Express*, a pinball platformer that seems to have delighted friends, colleagues and casual Twitter follows. But the thing about this page is I can put any game on it and nobody has the power to stop me. So here: a recommendation for *Sonic Spinball*. Deal with it.



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IT'S ALL OVER...

As journalists, we're dedicated to the truth. As such, we would like to suggest the following new names for some of the games of 2019



...UNTIL
MARCH
07



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